Chrysanthemum

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Chrysanthemum

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Summary

“You truly are the most beautiful creature,” Hannibal uttered, pupils blown wide, expanding in his black, dark eyes. “What did I do to deserve you?”

Will grinned and so did Hannibal, teeth bared, wild animals in the dark.

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President Verger: a tyrant, a sadist, a brute. A powerful force that Will imagined would be impossible to overcome- alone, at least. But there was far more to Panem than Will had previously known, and with it, came hope.

With it came Hannibal, and everything they could be.

Notes

we're finally here! I can't believe it either. thank you to each and every one of you that has followed this series from the beginning and supported it all the way. To all the newcomers, please read the parts before to understand and I hope you enjoy! this is a monster of a fic so settle in :)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will had always liked his neighbours. Mrs Hobbs was warm and pretty and she smelled nice, and Mr Hobbs always had a big grin for Will and occasionally let him round to see his weapons collection, hidden in the back of his little garage. Their little secret. He'd see them when his mom walked him to school in the mornings, throwing him a wave and sharing a cup of coffee on their sturdy porch. Through Will's childish eyes, they all lived pretty little sunlit lives, where the most important things were what he and Bev would do today, rather than when his next meal was. Rather than the reaping. His mind would be occupied with the stray dogs in the District or his next trip to the beach or his kind neighbours, who always had a ready smile for him, watching as he picked the flowers in their meticulous yard. Mr Hobbs would spy with his hawkish gaze but Mrs Hobbs would grin on, fat and happy. Well, not fat. Not exactly.

Even in his earliest memories, Mrs Hobbs' stomach was curved with maternity.

It was raining on a summer's day, a beautiful juxtaposition, when Mrs Hobbs went into labour. Will was only four, so he of course didn't quite understand what was going on, but her screams were like nothing he'd ever heard. She'd been chatting with his mother over the hedge while Will had been shuffling his feet a few metres away, impatient to get to the market- he'd promised to meet Beverly there. They were supposed to finally settle on a name for the ship they'd sail together when they grew up.

Mrs Hobbs cut off mid-sentence, trailing off with a choked gasp, hands flying to her bulging stomach. Despite the fairly obvious pain in her expression, she smiled, eyes filling with surprised tears.

“She's here,” she whispered, and then Will didn't see her for a day and a half.

When he did see her, it was at the Hobbs' house. He'd never been upstairs, let alone in their bedroom, but was fascinated with the stark whiteness of it all: bare walls, plain carpets, monochrome covers on the bed. The only things that stood out to him were the gold of Mrs Hobbs' hair, resting against the upright pillows, and the unmistakeable pink of a baby's skin, cradled in her arms. There was a soft glow surrounding them, motherly and tender. Will was swept up in it just by watching. She was smiling softly at the baby, but at the shift of Will's movements, she glanced up, directing that smile at him. It was open, welcoming.

“Come and meet her.”

The hush in the room made him sound like an *earthquake* as he crept over to see the baby, but when he saw her, he understood the quiet. Mrs Hobbs peeled back her blanket a little, revealing more of her face.

Whether beauty was subjective or not, this loveliness was undeniable.

Her features were more delicate than anything he'd ever seen, translucent skin, flushed coral with new life; a network of veins lying just below surface, mapping the paths of what was to come. Lips pursed, the bud of a rose. Eyelashes fluttering like individual strands from a paintbrush. Her tiny chest shook with tiny breaths. Fingers curled around nothingness, around air.

“How...” He had to clear his throat, struck by the eggshell elegance in her creation. “How'd you know she was gonna be a girl?”

She's here, she'd said. Mrs Hobbs tilted her head, considering. Will watched the cogs turn behind her eyes, but saw how they rusted and cracked, her brain coming up short.

“I don't know,” she admitted. “I just… did. I knew I had a daughter. Mother's intuition, I suppose.”

Despite never having heard the phrase, Will nodded, gazing down at her in awe. The women in his life were the most knowledgeable creatures he'd ever known. Their word was law. “What's her name?”

“Abigail.” *Abigail*. It made him think of the ocean, sunlight reflecting off its azure waves. “Do you know what it means?”

He shook his head.

“Father's joy,” she answered, eyes moving to where her husband stood across the room.

Will peeked at him, watching the way he watched his newborn daughter. It made his skin crawl for some odd, unknown reason, stilling his breath in his lungs. Which didn't make sense- Mr Hobbs had shown him nothing but kindness, and Will was sure he'd make a wonderful father. But there was something… off. Something unnatural. The back of his neck prickled, paranoia taking shape.

But then Mr Hobbs smiled, cheeks lifting and watery blue eyes creasing with joy, and it was forgotten.

Children could be such foolish, naive little things. Children could be so forgetful, so trusting. It was something they were adored almost universally for, viewed as sweet, harmless, endearing. But the implications of such character traits were not considered. And when they occurred, they were forgiven. Perhaps… perhaps they shouldn't be. Children were people just like everyone else, no matter their age, and that didn't exempt them from all blame.

It certainly didn't exempt Will.

Ignoring his reservations about Mr Hobbs was wrong. He knew that, but he let himself be drawn in anyway. Let himself be invited to see his weapons collection, let himself be asked in for lemonade, happily joined him in the front yard with Abigail, who was growing rapidly as the years passed like the seconds on a clock, a rose in bloom. Dark hair had sprouted from her head and her eyes were like a cloudy sky. It was the opposite of her mother, who had hair spun from gold and eyes like grass, and exactly like her father. Her open vulnerability was

something entirely new, however, something so innocent and guileless, an honesty that only the youngest of children could have. Lying was a foreign concept to them. As was deception.

Abigail was exactly as she appeared. A baby, a *toddler*, a forming entity that Will loved like nothing he'd loved before. He didn't have siblings, but he might as well have. She was a sister to him.

“Look at her go,” Mr Hobbs remarked one day, voice carrying on the wind, over the hedge to where Will was being bundled out of the house in preparation for school, coat half on. It wasn't summer today, not anymore. Winter was creeping over the horizon, with all its cold winds and crisp white snow. Abigail was buried underneath a thick coat herself, a woolly hat falling down past her ears as she pushed a snowball across the ground, which was slowly growing bigger the further it got. Her laugh was so honest and young Will wondered if it could make the ice melt.

There was so much he remembered about that day, and so much he didn't. It was nothing out of the ordinary, just a continuation of everything comprising his life from before. At school, he made snowmen with his classmates and learnt about what the Capitol did during this time of year, gasping at pictures of gaudy decorations climbing up skyscrapers, stretching up into the clouds, glinting in the winter sun. They played on the lake by school until past dinner time, watching as the ice began to crack and shatter beneath their weight, jumping to land just in time. Will knew the other kids thought he was kind of weird, but they were still so young. It didn't matter as much, back then.

He had fish for dinner. A common occurrence.

“Sleep well,” his dad whispered as he tucked him in a few hours later, movements soft in the darkness, shifting away from his narrow bed.

“Dad?”

“Yes, Will?”

“If someone tells you a secret, does that mean you can never say it?”

His dad had been halfway out of the door by then, and froze at the words. Carefully, he closed the door behind him, re-entering the room and blocking the light that had started spilling through the crack in the door. Time moved slowly as his father approached the bed, coming to a stop in front of him, sinking down onto the mattress. He was a mere shape in the darkness, a formless being, but a familiar one. His presence was a tether to the light, an escape from secrets and worry and vagaries that shouldn't be pervading the mind of a six year old.

“It depends what the secret is,” he murmured, his weight a comfort where it rested next to Will's outstretched legs. “Did someone tell you a secret, son?”

“Maybe.”

The glint of knives flashed through his mind, a passing shadow, a setting sun. Knives that a father shouldn't be hiding in his garage. The truth was, Will had been dreaming, recently. Dreams of blood and Abigail. Maybe he was paranoid, but he worried about her. She was so precious and delicate, so tiny, so breakable, and all he wanted was to shelter her from the world. It wasn't his place, not really. He was only her neighbour.

The other kids thought he was weird. His perceptive nature, the cryptic things he came out with… they didn't do him any favours. He yearned for friends, ones that weren't just Bev, longed for acceptance. Abigail was probably fine. The last thing he wanted was for his parents to turn their back on him as well.

“No,” he lied, guilt settling on his heart like fresh snow. “I was only wondering.”

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Moonlight cast visions of white upon the floor of his bedroom, beams of illumination that he awoke to. Dust floated amongst it, speckled stardust that hung in midair, dancing, enchanting. His joints were stiff as he attempted to move, shifting upwards, legs bending to allow his calves to fall off the bed, dangling a few inches off the floor, drawn to the light like he was possessed, like a moth to a flame, a firefly in the night. It was so quiet he could hear the sighing and creaking of the house, so unstable it was almost shivering in the gentle breeze. He heard, throughout it all, the lamps buzzing outside.

That wasn't *uncommon*, exactly, but it was certainly irritating. His legs were cold without the protection and warmth of the blanket, and colder yet when his feet hit the chilled wooden floor. He kept the shutters tightly closed in temperatures like this, but there wasn't much to be done about the cold that inevitably trickled in, fleeing from the freezing outdoors, spreading like an ink blotch. He could feel it swirling around his feet as he moved onward, forcing his feet to move amongst the chill. The buzzing streetlamp was flickering yellow when it finally came into view, appearing through the gaps in the shutters that he widened with his fingers, curious. The lamp was a neon contrast to the white of the moon and the black of the light. And under it: Garret Jacob Hobbs.

His eyes were fixed on Will's window, and he was utterly still, entirely unmoving. A predator hunting its prey. Will's heart stopped dead in his chest, the fear like a tide that couldn't be stemmed. The fear that was stopped with a single pleading look from someone with Abigail's eyes. It abated at one glance from them, their beauty, their familiarity.

“See?”

A whisper on the wind. The sea crashing against the beach.

Hobbs' finger trailed up, slowing in front of his mouth, a reminder. This was their little secret.

His finger was bloody. So was everywhere else, actually. Dripping down his face, caught in his stubble, and staining the white of his shirt, darkening as it dried, turning plum rather than remaining its usual savage scarlet. The finger pressed against his lips was led into a beckon, rooting Will to the spot even more than he had been before, focusing on blood and hooded eyes in the starlight. He stepped away from the window, legs moving like they were caught

against a strong current, lead, unwilling. He could hear his heart racing in his ears as he made his way downstairs, instinctively avoiding loose floorboards that would creak, silently moving through the house until he reached the door. It creaked, loud and ominous, as it swung open to reveal Mr Hobbs, a lit silhouette, standing in wait for him.

“I see.”

It was the only thing he said, or would say, before stepping outside and letting the door blow shut behind him, closing with a soft click. The cold air was a shock to his system, the snow a biting pain against the bare soles of his feet. Mr Hobbs smiled, the smile of a killer. Now, Will knew. Now Will saw. He saw the blood and the lust and the obsession, the satisfaction, all of it, stripped ugly and naked in front of him. And after allowing himself to be led nextdoor, he saw Mrs Hobbs, the sweet lady who'd brought him his greatest joy in this world, who'd given him the truest love he'd ever known.

Her throat was cut.

Blood was threaded around her neck like string. Like a noose. Her eyes were lifeless and clouded with death, her arms limp and broken, strewn outwards where she lay dead on the porch, a shell of her former self. Will stood by her corpse, a compliant guard dog, as Hobbs entered the house, the sound of frenzied crying increasing as he opened the door. It grew, drawing nearer and nearer until he came back into sight, approaching the door and dragging Abigail along behind him, a dog on a leash. Her face was contorted in agonising confusion, dizzying fear. Eyes widening at Will's presence, he saw hope seep into her little face, realisation that *Will was here*, *Will would save her*, *Will would explain why daddy was being so odd*.

Then her gaze flicked to her mother, dead on the floor, and the panic and pain came flooding back. Will saw just as her breath caught, readying her to scream, a normal reaction of terror to the nightmare fuel around her. Her father clapped a hand over her mouth just in time, hand locking around her waist, letting the scream die in her throat, unheard.

He grinned, and nodded to the knife, which lay by the head of poor, dead Mrs Hobbs. When Will crouched down to retrieve it, his eyes barely left her face. It was slack, open, empty. Void of the carefree joy it usually held. Her golden hair was matted with sticky blood, as red as strawberries, and Will felt it in his gut like a parasite, burrowing deep and draining him, drowning him, leeching his guilt and sorrow, spilling it out into the rest of him.

“It'll be alright, Abi,” Mr Hobbs was soothing, hand smoothing through her hair, abandoning its position of restraining her. It could afford to move, really. She looked far too terrified to do anything even given the choice. “Mummy's alright. You'll be alright.”

Will straightened, the knife in his hand, heavier than anything he'd ever held. He wondered what had driven Mr Hobbs to this, if this had been a sudden break or a planned event. He wondered if he'd always been like this. If he perhaps should've seen it, in Mr Hobbs' stash of weapons or the way he looked at Abigail when he thought nobody saw. Could Will have stopped this? Could he have seen it, somehow?

“See?” Mr Hobbs said again, eyes now focused on Will. They flicked to the knife hanging from his loose fist, knowing, *seeing*. “Give it to me,” he whispered, his hand going slack around Abigail's mouth. It was soft, not harsh. Urging, not forcing.

“Will?”

Abigail's voice was tiny, young. A dying songbird. A flower in the breeze.

Will turned, and ran.

He ran until his legs ached with fatigue and his lungs screamed for air. He was too young to ever outrun an adult man, but he knew he had a fair headstart, seeing as Hobbs would have to deal with Abigail, lock her in and shut her up somehow. He ran until he could hear the sea, his own ragged breaths matching with the crashing of the waves and the identical sounds of Hobbs behind him, almost caught up. He barely noticed as gravel turned to grass turned to sand, as water deepened around him until it reached his knees. Holy water. Absolution.

It smelt of salt. It smelt of blood.

Behind him, he heard Hobbs pause, waiting at the water's edge.

In his six years of life, never had he felt so alive. *This* was what life was. *This* was why the Districts slaved on, submissive to the will of the Capitol, through hell or high water. Because there was nothing else. It was this, or death. This was the only existence they knew.

“I see,” he repeated.

They would never find Garret Jacob Hobbs. His body would wash out to sea, forgotten and miles away, decomposing out there with the fish. Will hadn't meant to. Not really.

Yes really.

He'd been so close. He'd waded out to sea behind Will, and his breath had washed across his neck, rotting and stale. Will had forgotten about the knife in his hand as he'd spun to see him, a beast in the dark, and watched as the sharp blade penetrated his abdomen and he'd doubled over, shocked, pained. He'd died at sea, pathetic and undeserving, a murderous victim.

They would never find Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Will *had* remembered the knife. He'd known Hobbs would think him weak, think him incapable of brutality as the child he was. Hobbs had been standing under that lamp, waiting for him to appear, and it had been to teach him. To show him. Prove to him everything he could be. He hadn't taken into account the possibility that Will didn't need to be shown anything.

He'd remembered the knife, and plunged it into Hobbs as he swivelled to face him.

He'd murdered.

He'd murdered and walked all the way home, feet raw and bleeding from the ground. Abigail was sat at the window seat in her house, asleep against the glass, an exhausted and miserable innocent in all of this. Her mother looked asleep too, and it would've been believable if it weren't for her pillow of blood. Will walked onward, slipping into his house unnoticed, and returning to bed.

When he awoke, he didn't remember a thing.

When he awoke, Abigail didn't remember a thing.

Oh, the intricacies of the human mind. How it tried to protect them from trauma. How it let them forget. How it loved them.

Only bloody fingers and glaring streetlamps remained. Only one word remained.

See?

Chapter End Notes

all is revealed :) this is everything that happened with GJH and some pretty solid proof that the darkness hannibal coaxed from will has always been there. hope it was worth the wait!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It's beautiful.”

They'd fallen. Fallen into nothing. Fallen into everything.

Will had really thought… perhaps this was the end. No more pain. No more fear. Just him and Hannibal, at one with the world, at peace with death. They were falling into forever and they only had each other.

Death would be kind. Death would be welcoming. He'd been waiting a while, after all. Will had thought his number was up the minute he so recklessly volunteered, resigning himself to a fate that he no longer had any control of. But it had led him here. It had led him to Hannibal.

Did he regret it?

Yes.

Would he do it all over again, regret and all?

Yes.

Love made fools of men and it made fools of monsters. That decision all that time ago had brought him suffering beyond belief, but it had also brought him passion like he'd never known. The latter weighed far more than the former. The decision had brought him *life*, despite how close he'd been to losing it. Perhaps that was the only real way to live. Life without love seemed pointless, now he'd tried both.

At least he'd die with love, a silent shadow in his chest, instead of an empty heart, alone and unknowing.

He'd die with Hannibal.

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Will had always preferred being cold. Heat was unbearable, stifling, unending. Cold could be stunted, if only a little- there were always layers. There were always walls. When he was a child, his father would light the fireplace during winter and wrap him in the blanket from his bed, letting him fall asleep right there in front of the fire, the cold seeping in from outside and the warmth from the flames clashing with it. Now, however, he didn't have a fire. Walls weren't doing him any good. Layers could, if he had any. But he didn't. He was cold and alone on the ground, shaking and shivering like a wet dog. He missed his dogs, much more than he imagined he would.

Imagining wouldn't do him any good either.

The ground was chilled concrete, and as his eyes blinked open, he could see that there were bars surrounding him, horizontal lines striking through his line of sight. As he eased himself up, the lines shifted vertical, moving with him as he abandoned his position on the floor. They were like metal stalks, growing from the floor, an uncomfortable juxtaposition to such an unforgiving climate. Will could occasionally be slow when it came to common sense, but in this case, it was fairly easy to work out that he was in a cell. Trapped. Contained within a cage like an *animal*.

And Garret Jacob Hobbs dancing around in his brain didn't make things any easier. He remembered, now. It was still a blur, but there was so much more he could see. Will supposed the trauma of the fall may have helped him recover repressed memories of that night, or perhaps it had just been the sight of blood in the moonlight. Either way, a lot of things made sense now. His attraction to death, the seamless transition into murder, the trend of trouble seeking him out. It all led back to then, an innocent six year old corrupted by the sick desires of a sick man. One who was dead, lost at sea, out there with any trace of proof linking Will to his disappearance. According to all accounts, including Abigail's, he'd slept through the entire thing, as had she. But who would suspect a child? He passed without suspicion, not even quite remembering *himself*. The flash of memory had faded with age, until it had been nothing but a footprint in the sand, a smudge before the tide came in.

Something had kept the tide at bay. Now the footprints were becoming starker, clearer, their fading years drifting away on the breeze. This was his making. This was his beginning. If only Hannibal were there to see it.

But that was another issue entirely, as was his current predicament.

He'd survived the fall, somehow, and now he was locked up in some faraway hiding place, no doubt at Verger's mercy all over again. Not a lot had changed then, only now it was slightly more obvious. His main sense of distress wasn't *where*, however, but who. Who else was here? Was Hannibal here as well? Did they capture him? What about Beverly, or even Peter or Georgia?

It seemed unlikely. Hannibal's presence was certainly possible, as they'd gone down together, but Will was under the impression that the others had escaped. Hannibal had said something cryptic and urged them away, and Will trusted him. He would not have led their friends to their deaths.

“Will?” It was a whisper, a broken, sobbing voice, scratching through the silence, its misery like nails on a chalkboard.

Blindly seeking, he spun to the source of the sound, crawling over to the edge of his cell. Through the bars, he could see the small and hunched figure of a woman, peering at him in the dim light. Her hair hung lank and greasy around her face, which was smudged with grime and dirt.

“Margot?”

“Will,” she breathed, voice raspy from lack of use, hands darting up to clutch at the bars that separated them. He joined her there, their fingers brushing, curling around each other. It was a small comfort in a situation Will was entirely clueless about. Her eyes looked dull and lifeless, but sparked with hope as they met Will's. He was happier to see her than he at all expected, despite their apparent situation. “What happened? In the Games?”

“You didn't see?”

“They took me pretty soon after you first went in. I don't know how long it's been since then, but they brought you in yesterday. You were out cold, and your wounds were all sewn up. I'm assuming it's been at least a few days since the Games ended. Possibly even longer than a week.”

His hand flew to his cheek, vividly recalling the immense pain that had hit him as his flesh had torn there. It had tiny ridges where the stitches protruded a little, holding him together like fabric. His fingers ventured down to his shoulder, where the knife had punctured him just adjacent to his clavicle, leaving destruction and agony in its wake. Now there was only a scarring injury, carefully tended to with bandages and stitches that Will wouldn't have made it without. Which slightly contrasted to his status as a prisoner here, well-treated and encouraged to survive, but who was he to complain? Any medical attention he could get, he'd willingly accept. He wasn't so proud as to know when to give in and let himself be helped.

“I… We fell.” His mind retrieved it all, rushing air and warm blood and Hannibal's loving expression. “Hannibal and I fell. Have you seen him?”

“Sorry,” she whispered, and his heart didn't know whether to drop or lift, simultaneously heartbroken that he didn't know if he was alive and hopeful that he *was*, now somewhere better, safer. “It's only been you.”

“Is this your brother's doing?”

“Of course,” she answered, a cruel smirk twisting her mouth, eyes reflective. The faint traces of distaste she'd always displayed toward him in the media had made more sense the more time he spent with both Verger and Margot respectively. It wasn't distaste at all, it was *hate*, pure and simple. And Verger was a pompous pig, who certainly deserved all the hate he received, especially from a woman so admirable and strong. “Who else?”

“Who else indeed?”

Both their heads snapped to fix on Verger, strolling up to their cells, a slight spring in his step. He'd been silent up until now, expertly hidden, no doubt eavesdropping on their conversation. Will felt all that disgust and loathing he'd tried to forget about flare up again like wildfire, scorching his throat as it did, inciting nausea in its wake. Verger looked at him and *knew*, knew about all that fury and pain, and *thrived* off it. Margot hadn't unlinked their hands, and Will clung onto her, feeling as if she was the only tie to sanity he had. Her fingers were clammy and grubby, but they were real. She was a reminder that he was still, in fact, alive.

“Where's Hannibal?” he asked, the words spilling almost accidentally, blood from a fresh wound. Verger smirked. Will had already displayed his weakness, though Verger had already guessed what it was a long, long time ago.

“Hannibal?” Verger repeated, mocking, cruelty lining his face. “Hannibal is dead.”

Dead. Sometimes, Will thought he only feltalive when Hannibal looked at him, eyes sparkling with want and smitten astonishment, like Will was some figment of his imagination come true. And now… he was gone. His world crashing down around him must have been evident on his face, as Verger reacted with a smirk, looking down on Will where he was crouched on the dirty, cold floor, a cornered animal, Verger his master. At his mercy, for whatever horrors he would inflict.

“I don't believe you,” Will said bluntly, stupidly, disbelievingly. It felt like his heart was being split in two, a shattering earthquake.

“But Will,” he purred, “you do. You were the one who killed him, after all.”

He'd thought they would both die, holding each other as they left the world behind. It had been the only out he saw, and he knew Hannibal had agreed- or complied, at the very least. Will wondered whether that had anything to do with logic, however. It could have been the suffocating euphoria and victory in the moment, sending both their heads spinning.

“No,” he croaked, grief going off like explosions in his head. Verger was lying. He *had* to be lying. This was *Hannibal*, who Will could envision surviving anything, even a fall like that. A fall that lasted forever. He was in another cell somewhere, the opposite side of the building, in similar conditions to Will. It was the only likely scenario, except the prospect of *death*. Which Will wouldn't be entertaining any time soon, if he was going to remain lucid. “I don't believe you.”

“Believe me, don't believe me, I don't care,” Verger dismissed. “It doesn't change the truth: you will never see him again. Enjoy your stay, Will,” he said, smug, as he turned to leave. “We'll be seeing a lot of each other soon.”

As he sauntered away, Will looked over to Margot in confusion, stuck on his last statement. Horror was plastered on her expression, and pity was infused in her eyes. She shook her head at him, helpless and speechless. Will didn't really have to ask, after seeing that. There was enough to infer from her reaction. Whatever Verger had meant, it wasn't good; probably torture of some kind. Which meant that eventually, it would end in death- Will wasn't family like Margot was. It was doubtful Verger would keep him alive very long. Here was where his life ended, scared and alone, uncertain of the fate of his loved ones.

What a way to go.

It felt so alike to that period of time during his very first Games, lost, lonely and afraid, half-convinced that he'd die before he found Bev, half-entranced by Hannibal and his riddles, attention divided between his intrinsic survival instinct, compassion for Bev and his teenage fascination with beautiful things. His real blessing had come in the form of Hannibal's requital, his steadfast pursuit, leading Will down a path that couldn't be imagined without

him. How could he have known it would bring him here? Had it *always* been going to end this way?

Had it been worth it?

The cold floor of the cell was a grounding constant beneath him, a non-negotiable reminder of everything he'd been through. He'd suffered pain and loss and terrifying transformations, he'd watched people die both at his own hand and at the hand of another's. Not only had it changed him, but it had changed his *family*, his entire life, bringing him prosperity he didn't need, accompanied by fear he'd do much better without. None of that had meant anything, not if it ended here. Money was no use without a lifetime to spend it. If he died, his mother and Abigail wouldn't be permitted to remain in the Victors' Village. Not if they didn't have a victor. They'd lose it all, and the entirety of his experiences and sacrifices in the Games would be made irrelevant.

Hannibal was dead.

This had been the only compensation for his great, painful ordeal. His only repayment. And now it was gone, now he had lost *Hannibal*, who he loved so much it hurt almost as much his memories from the Games. *Had* loved so much.

Hannibal was *dead*.

So what was the point of it all?

But he thought of brown eyes, glinting in the sunlight, warm chocolate. Chocolate had never been a luxury Will had much access to, and then it was everywhere, in beautiful eyes and soil and the bark of the endless trees. It made him melt. Hannibal was his whole world, at one point, when all his life consisted of was worrying about Bev and when he'd get to eat. Hannibal had swept in and fed him, led him, taken him to Beverly and taken him to victory. Will was not the same person he had been before the Games, and in many ways that was bad. But not *all* bad. Not *every* way.

He'd fallen in love.

Hannibal was dead.

It was worth it.

Chapter End Notes

happy 2018! I hope you all had a good NYE and I hope you all enjoy the chapter :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

warning: torture ahead. not a fun chapter.

Sleep was a rare thing in the cells of Verger's mansion. Will *assumed* they were in his mansion, or somewhere similar. The two cells were nestled together against a back wall, facing onto a small but open room cut off from the rest of the building by a great double door, a shining wood, a rich mahogany. The ceiling was patterned and the stone walls were ornate, old and crumbling but beautiful all the same, their design still clear despite their age. It was enough for Will's idea that they were in or under the mansion to remain plausible, and there had been no evidence to suggest otherwise. It was the most likely theory, considering that they were definitely in the Capitol somewhere, a conclusion he could deduce from the recognisable uniforms of the guards hovering by the doors, peering over at the pitiful prisoners once in a while. They were watched every hour of every day, the sounds of pacing and crackling scanner radios making it hard to drift into unconsciousness. It was loud and it was constant. When it came to sleep, Will preferred the quiet.

The barren surroundings certainly didn't help either. To sleep, he'd lay on the cold and bare floor, sending him shivering or shifting, freezing or uncomfortable or both. He had no blanket. No pillow. No source of comfort and nothing to hold while he cried for Hannibal and home, confined to some unfamiliar wasteland he felt as if he'd never escape. His last days would be undignified and desperate, an even more forceful hit to his pride and spirit, expertly manoeuvred by Verger to make things even worse for him. He may have been a terrible leader, but he was a talented torturer.

Torture. Of course, the worst was yet to come.

It had probably been a little over a week since he'd awoken in the cell, according to the tallies he was drawing in the dust, and he hadn't been touched by Verger yet. He'd eventually get a few hours sleep every now and then, and he'd be plied with minimal amounts of food and water, near-unbearable swill shoved through the bars that he would shovel down like it was the best meal he'd ever eaten. It was all he could get, and it would have to do. He knew it was only a matter of time, however, before Verger would grow tired of the half-starvation, sleep deprivation and restless confinement he was bestowing upon Will. The waiting game would come to an end, and Will would come to feel his full wrath, by the blade of a knife or the blunt of his fists. Verger was cruel, and that made him predictable.

Margot would be dragged away on occasion, yanked up by her arm by an impatient guard and dragged from the room in spite of Will's despairing protests, not to be seen for hours. She'd return a lifetime later, shrouded by the dark, supported by kinder guards, gentler guards, who were still dismissive and cruel as they let her fall to the floor of her cell. When

they both got up close to the bars, seeking each other's familiarity, she would be covered in bruises and blood, spotting her face, her arms, all the skin that was on show. She looked like a human canvas.

“Why does he hurt you?” Will asked once. “What does he want?”

“Fun,” she answered, spitting blood from her mouth, grinning at him, red speckles on her teeth. “Don't you know? It's all a big game to him. Nothing will make him stop.”

Perhaps the most dangerous type of man was a man who had no clear motives, other than that of enjoyment. Verger was a man like that, who caused pain for the sake of causing pain, not for any personal or political gain. He only wanted destruction. He only wanted suffering. Men like that were a rare breed, and Will was grateful for it, but it was a chilling truth about humanity that people like that existed, even if there were only a few. That people like that were stationed in positions of authority, directing the law and managing the people. People like that ran Panem and dictated Will's whole life. To say he harboured a certain amount of resentment towards them would be an understatement.

Resentment was useless while he was trapped like this. Resentment had no power.

Verger was the one with the power here. It became increasingly clear as the days sped past, his food portions growing smaller, his sleep becoming less frequent, and Margot's time spent in the cell rapidly reducing. Will wondered the specifics of what Verger was inflicting on her, his morbid curiosity climbing every time she returned, looking more beaten down every time. It was wrong of him to wonder, and maybe that was why.

Maybe that was why Verger got bored.

Will had been expecting this, but hadn't thought it would occur so soon. He'd been slowly starved over his time here, and had been prepared to go hungry a little longer. A lot longer. Either his judgement had been entirely incorrect or Verger hadn't wanted to wait anymore, and he couldn't be sure which, but when a message crackled through the guards' radios, unintelligible to Will's ears, he felt a bolt of fear rush through him. Margot had only been back an hour or two- was Verger really that cruel? But then their gazes turned to him instead, and he knew.

He kept his eyes closed as they unlocked the cell door and threw it open, not wanting to see their hulking figures as they bent in to retrieve him for their master. They were rough with him, their respective grips on his arms unyielding, fingernails biting into him like the sharp teeth of a wild animal, Margot's screams of protest in the background like the wails of dying prey. This was not Hannibal's savagery. This was not something he could tame. It was, to an extent, something that even *he* couldn't fully understand, had trouble actually grasping. Verger was more than the average killers he'd come across, more than the especially bad ones. More than Budge or Brown or Tier, more than Ingram and Dolarhyde, with all their experience and age.

Willing his eyes open as spilling light painted the inside of his eyelids orange, he quickly catalogued everything in sight. The high walls were a pale yellow, with regal patterns stretching up to the ceiling. The floor was a light, polished wood, as opposed to the

cobblestone ground of the cells that he'd been lying on for the past week and a half. His cell walls were nowhere near as high as these, the bars only stretching up so far in his primitive accommodation, preventing any urge he might have to stand and stretch his legs. He hadn't stood in days, so his legs weren't quite up to their usual standard, meaning that by the time they reached the stairs, they weren't working at all. The guards didn't care. He was forcibly pulled upwards, feet and ankles banging against each step as he was hauled toward imminent pain, heart sinking as he went.

Eventually, noticing everything became too confusing to bear as they navigated him through a long maze of corridors, marching onwards and trailing Will along behind them, hanging half-limp and supported by their arms. He only really made note of the final point, as they reached a door a few floors upwards, inconspicuous amongst its identical brothers and sisters. Swinging it open, however, revealed a torture chamber that Will was willing to bet was not behind all the other doors. Its fluorescent lights made Will blink in surprise, attempting to make sense of the room and its dimensions, head throbbing as he was dragged into the stuffy heat of Verger's impending abuse.

“He's weak,” a guard explained in a gruff voice, directing it at three people who were stood in the centre of the room, poised beside a table that straps and belts hung across, circling nothingness. Will peeked up, seeing that one was Verger, his familiar smug expression on show. One was a nameless but persistent presence at the President's side, his main bodyguard, Will suspected, there to protect him from any harm. Harm that was unlikely, as no Capitol citizen would dare try, or even want, to harm their dear, beloved leader.

The third figure he did not recognise.

“The weaker the better, I say,” one of them said, in a voice that did not have Verger's nasal superiority to it.

“Good to see you, Mr Graham.” Now *that* was Verger, strolling over to where Will was being held up, fingers searching for his chin and tilting up his head so he could look right back at him, into his dead, lifeless eyes. “This is Carlo and Cordell. You'll be getting to know them quite well, soon. Almost as well as dear Margot.”

“What do you mean?” he hissed through gritted teeth, fury and terror clinging to him.

“Why, *torture*, of course,” Verger replied, grinning with glee at it all. It was hilarious to him. It was brilliant to him.

“What do you want?” he asked in one last desperate plea, unable to let go of the possibility that Margot might be mistaken, that Verger simply was looking for a trade. Information for free passage home.

“I want your blood.”

His face was slammed into the table so hard he could feel the bruises already forming, and people began fumbling with the straps, shifting his arms to accommodate them. He was already sweating in the heat and the bright lights weren't helping, sending his senses haywire and uncomfortable as his heart raced a drumbeat in his chest. Verger laughed and laughed

like Will's suffering was the funniest joke he'd heard in years, and Will wondered if perhaps it was. At least someone was getting enjoyment out of this.

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Will didn't remember much from that day. He didn't even know if it *was* day, shut in a cell with only the dim candlelight from the walls allowing him to see. The candles never went out. They were made to sleep with them, and Will had lost track of his days and nights, of time altogether. He could've been strapped to the table for weeks or minutes, to all his knowledge. He didn't know the difference anymore.

The lights were so bright they were making his head hurt, aching from both the blinding fluorescence and the impact of his jaw into the hard surface of the table. The blood lingered in his mouth like a sickly aftertaste, only becoming more distinguished as he saw knives glinting in his peripheral vision. He wanted desperately to listen into the conversation they were having, but it contrasted fairly dramatically with the throbbing of his brain and the impulse to simply give up, give over, let Verger have his way. There wasn't much he could do to stop him, restrained and at the mercy of his house full of guards, all of whom would be perfectly happy to murder Will in cold blood and without a second thought.

“How does it feel to know you killed him?” Verger said, the knife coming closer. “That you're the reason he's dead?”

Will's throat was dry. Too dry. They hadn't been given nearly enough water down there.

“Answer me,” Verger demanded, knife now lightly pressing over his ribcage, “or I'll cut your heart out. How does it feel?”

“It feels like you already did,” Will managed in response, the constricting agony of Hannibal's death falling over him like a curtain of grief. He hardly felt it anymore. Those first few days had been hell, the tears unstoppable until he was so dehydrated and racked with sobbing contractions that he could barely cry or move. After that, there had only been numbness. There was a possibility Verger was lying, of course, which meant that his mourning was for nothing, or it could've been Verger himself who killed Hannibal, rather than the fault of Will's, making his guilt irrelevant. But that wondering, that bargaining… it didn't change anything. He was trapped and he had no way of knowing the truth.

He didn't even have his stag. Verger had it locked away somewhere, had stolen it like he'd stolen Will from the arena, ripped his heart fully from his chest. Will only had memories now.

So to him, Hannibal was dead.

Arguably, it was better to sever ties than to hang onto any possibility of him being alive. That way, Will would die still hoping, inevitably disappointed. He'd decided it was best to accept what he had, to at least die with dignity. The integrity of truth, the integrity of choice. It was perhaps the only thing he had left, except for Margot.

“Do you enjoy pain, Mr Graham?”

Time had passed. His throat was raw, presumably from screaming, *hopefully* from screaming, and his arms and legs felt wet and sticky from fresh blood. The sweat had stopped pouring down his face, had now reverted to an uncomfortable paste of cold perspiration, glued to his brow. What had happened to time? Verger was threatening to cut out his heart only seconds ago, surely. But no, the knife was far removed from his chest and out of his line of sight, as was Verger, strolling around the table and waiting for his answer.

“No.”

His voice was barely there. Verger laughed as he tried to speak, laughed at his pitiful attempt, his broken demeanour. This process, this pain, it was expert. It wasn't a method he'd tried on Margot a fair few times and then repeated with Will. This was practised, perfected, *prized*. This was potentially the only thing Verger really *loved*, an extension and representation of his true self. In a way this was intimate. He was exposing himself to Will as the monster he really was, and of course that wouldn't ever mean anything unless Will escaped, which he of course wouldn't, but displaying himself bare and vulnerable like that was an impulsive move on Verger's part. His impatience and inability to wait out Will's starvation, it only proved how this excited him, how deeply he enjoyed this. Will had something on him, even if it was only understanding of his mind's inner workings.

“Then why do you seek it?” Verger whispered in his ear, breath like a winter breeze.

No time had passed. The blood was still fresh and his throat was still raw. Why was time not working?

“I don't,” he murmured, earning himself a sharp whack to the leg with something that was decidedly *not* a hand. It was long and thin and left a quivering explosion of stinging agony behind, undoubtedly impressing red lines along his thighs, that were somehow bare. He wasn't stripped entirely naked, but he realised now that a lot of his skin was touched by the air, available to his torturers. When it had happened, however, was a mystery to him. He'd thought he was still in the rags he'd been wearing all week.

“Don't disagree with me,” Verger purred, and it was slow, menacing. “I'm right, and you just don't know it. You don't *see* it, it's *fantastic*!” His sudden exclamations were simply a characteristic of his dialect, but it never failed to make Will flinch in surprise, especially this close to it. “Here's the crux of it, Mr Graham: you volunteered. *Twice*. And whatever justification you grant that, it doesn't change the empirical truth that you seek pain. Whether it's subconscious or not, it's the reason you're here now. Enduring this suffering.”

Oh. Well.

There was a point there, an understandable one, an avoidable one.

“Another few lashings I think, Carlo,” Verger instructed to a direction Will couldn't see the end of.

If he really did seek pain, then this was surely heaven.

Chapter 4

Glimpsing himself in any reflective surface hadn't been a plan of his, and if it had been, it certainly would've been one of the ostentatious mirrors in the corridors he would've used, rather than the gleaming silver of the weapons tray. His reflection was wide and distorted, his nose larger than usual and eyes blocked by the shining fluorescence, but how terrible he looked was unmistakable. The dark circles under his eyes were like charcoal smeared on his skin, which was a whole other factor along with the dirt his face had accumulated downstairs, and the jagged, shabby cut along his cheek was badly stitched. He could feel it whenever he moved his jaw, pulling at the skin, but he hadn't seen it until now. Verger glanced over as he wrapped up some scalpels, noticing how Will's fingers danced along the wound, and chuckled.

“It's not healing very nicely,” he remarked. “It'll scar. If you aren't dead before then.”

Bile rose in his throat alongside the blood. In some ways, he was lucky Verger hadn't decided to kill him right there and then, freeing up some cell space for his other victims. But he'd spared him. Saved him only so he could torture him more, but saved him all the same. Perhaps if he hung on a little longer he'd get some news or information, some reward from the universe for all he'd been through. All he wanted was to know if the people he loved were alive. Hannibal was dead, but what of Beverly? Abigail and his mother? Georgia and Peter? They could be out there somehwere, could've escaped the arena in some way or another, while the Gamemakers and public were distracted by the big finale between he, Hannibal and the Dragon.

Deep down he knew that it would've been impossible to flee the arena. It was sealed off, and only available to the Capitol. They were dead. The only reason he hadn't let Bev's death eat him up inside was because Verger had neglected to mention her, allowing him to hang on to a sliver of hope that she was somewhere out there, safe and healthy and alive.

“When do you think that'll be?” he whispered. He could only whisper, after all. His voice wouldn't make any coherent sounds after all the screaming.

“Your death?” Verger asked, and Will nodded. “Oh, I don't know. I think there's a lot more fun to be had, don't you?”

Tears fell wet and warm the minute he was propelled into his cell, thrown to the floor with a pained gasp. He was sure he had cried while Verger had put the knife to his skin, had mindlessly brought the whip down to his flesh, but it was all slightly blurry. Whether that was a side effect of the pain or another action by his brain to protect him, he didn't know. He couldn't stem the flow now, however, the stinging of the lashes and multiple fresh wounds layered across him too much to bear. Not only that, but he was preoccupied with the unknown fate of his friends and family. He wouldn't feel ashamed for crying.

“Where?” Margot whispered, knowing, and Will drew away the rags he was newly dressed in to reveal the long red lines along his thigh. She winced in sympathy, her hands clenching

where they were woven around the bars that separated them. “I know it hurts,” she murmured to him, reaching her slender arms through the bars to wipe away his tears. “But it'll feel better soon, I promise.”

“Did he do this to you?”

“No. He does… other things to me.”

Her pause made his blood run cold. It was an ashamed silence, a nervous and resigned energy about her as she shifted in front of him, gaze trailing to the tattered skin of his legs.

“What things?” It came out sharper than intended, but he couldn't bring himself to feel guilty, his senses prickling in warning, in confusion and wariness.

“He prefers to use the crop on me,” she answered, shrugging. “Cleaner hits,” she added, and Will felt sick with it all.

“Thank you, Margot,” he said. “I'm glad you're here.”

I'm glad I'm not alone, he meant, and she smiled in response, understanding, reciprocating. Her hand brushed his, small comfort, and she moved away from the bars, further back into her cell, leaving a cold empty space adjacent to Will, that he longed for her to continue filling. It wasn't nice being lonely in a place like this.

“Goodnight,” she whispered, and he nodded it back at her, still unmoving, watching as she gently lay down on the floor, shuffling to accommodate herself, and shut her eyes against the onslaught of sleep. Momentarily, he paused, eyes still fixed on her, all the while knowing she was probably aware of it. But they both knew it wasn't predatory.

It was pitying.

For Will to be stuck here, Verger's plaything from the very beginning, beaten and broken down, it was one thing. For Verger's *sister*, the woman he grew up with, to be in the same position… it was another thing entirely. That loss of family was devastating. He knew Margot wasn't fond of her brother either, but the concept of siblings being so detached from one another to partake in such a dysfunctional dynamic floored him every time he thought about it. He thought of Abigail with such tenderness and respect, and the idea of treating her with anything less was inconceivable. Margot deserved far better.

“Goodnight,” he finally replied, hushed, to her curled up, half-asleep form.

Shifting back from the bars, he sank to the uneven ground, turning his back and following her into the darkness.

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“Is he asleep?”

Waking to flickering candlelight was actually a pleasant experience, in direct contrast to harsh sun bursting through the window at dawn. Candlelight was soft, coaxing him to

consciousness with a steady and patient hand. The candles were always lit here, always fluttering in the dark. He liked the shadows they spun on the walls.

“I think so.”

“Quiet, then.”

The whispering, on the other hand, wasn't quite as enjoyable. Back home, it would be cheerful birds or the crashing ocean that accompanied his awakening. Now, he had grown used to silence, save for the static on the radios and footsteps of the restless guards. Whispering was secretive. Whispering was dangerous, especially in a place like this.

Listening closely, he attempted to distinguish the voices. One, of course, belonged to Margot, largely coming from her direction and retaining the husky femininity that she spoke with even in a whisper. The other voice was clearer, brasher, masculine and threatening. It put Will on edge, where he remained crumpled on the ground only a few metres away from whatever was going on. Fabrics rustled behind him, making sound as they were deliberately moved, and somebody sighed, sad and accepting.

“No pouting now, Margot.”

Now *that* was recognisable. The way Verger said her name was unique in its possessive abandonment, dripping with sleaze and threat. What was he *doing*, creeping in here while they slept and asking about Will's sleep patterns? It was beyond odd behaviour, especially for Verger. If he was going to torture them, he'd order his lackeys to do the real work while he sat around in his torture chamber and played with crops and scalpels. Having personal conversations with his sister was very unlike him.

“I don't-” Margot cut off, voice catching on a note of high panic. “I don't want...”

“Well,” Verger responded, low and rasping in the silence, “I do.”

There was another shift and a grunt, a whimper, a symphony of pain and pleasure. There was the sound of tearing, ripping followed by a chuckle and a fearful, trembling exhale. He screwed his eyes shut against the dim lighting, working out in his head the dimensions and movements behind him, furrowing his brow. His hands clenched into tiny fists, clinging for safety onto the rags covering him as he pushed past the confusion.

Could it...

There was an odd sizzle, a hiss.

A wince or a burn?

It couldn't be what he'd worried, then. What he'd feared was happening to her up there, what he'd feared had happened to her even before all this. The way Verger looked at her sometimes. The way Garret Jacob Hobbs had looked at his daughter. It wasn't entirely sexual in nature, but it was possessive, unrelenting, victimising. But where Hobbs had indeed held some form of tenderness for Abigail, and Will was almost certain he had never touched her

like that, Verger only seemed to view Margot in a derogatory and expendable light. Such a lack of compassion. Had it always been this way, even when they were children? What was actually happening?

What was Will supposed to do?

Bars stood in the way of him and whatever tragedy this was. If they didn't, he wouldn't hesitate to at least *try*, protect Margot somehow, attack someone over twice his age even if it was just a long shot. The bars *were* there, however, and there was no getting rid of them. Instead, he lay frozen in fear, unable to see as the huffs of Verger's sadistic enjoyment and Margot's quiet terror floated throughout the space. How he longed to still be asleep. Margot was entirely passive, though not consenting to whatever this was.

He sat up. Turned. Saw.

The sizzling- it was an iron, glowing burnt orange at the end. The orange dripped along the indentation of a crest, where it was held, hovering above Margot's exposed flank, the fabric covering her torn open, exposing her, humiliating her. Verger was straddled atop her, and her hair was fanned around her head, her face twisted in despairing discomfort. Her eyes widened when she saw him, a gasp caught between her teeth like a smoking cigarette, hot ash dripping off the end.

“Please don't.”

His own voice surprised him, barely a whisper into the nothingness. Verger did not cease, didn't even *look*, but Will saw the flash of a grin slip across his face as he pushed his hand down, unyielding. Margot didn't say a word, despite tears beginning to bubble up in her eyes, her gaze fixed on Will as they began to spill. Agony flowed throughout her face, mouth falling open in shattering pain. He could only stare back, transfixed by the compliance of this broken woman who was such a contrast to the Margot he'd known before, strong and silent but fierce in her opinions, steadfast in her defiance of her brother.

“It's okay,” she breathed, and smiled, and *that* was her. Comforting Will while she was defiled on the ground by her evil, sick brother, like she was worth nothing more than one of his prize pigs.

Will had always had trouble believing they were related, and now this only reinforced his refusal to see any resemblance. They were so very different. Her hand reached out from under him, seeking, and she was just close enough that Will could grab hold of it, grasping on tightly and knowing that he wouldn't let go. It was hard to be close to it in any way, but it must've been harder yet for Margot. He couldn't allow her to deal with this alone.

The next few seconds were, perhaps, some of the most haunting and horrific of Will's life.

Eventually, he had to shut his eyes against the tide of Margot's terror, and let his head drop onto his knees, which had made their way up to his chest where he sat. He held her hand until he was sure it would be red when she finally let go, and they clung on together as they waited for Verger to finish, pressing heat into her and releasing the smell of burning flesh. When he

did, Margot exhaled in quiet relief, shaking on the floor. Verger didn't say a word as he rose, laughing down at them, his obedient pets.

“I look forward to your turn, Mr Graham.”

A chill brushed through the air as he left, settling in Will's lungs, burning alcohol. Margot didn't let go of his hand, only hung on tighter, sending cramps hurtling along his fingers, not quite painful enough to make him let go, but certainly enough to bite.

“I won't let him touch you,” she uttered, hoarse.

He shook his head, almost at a loss for words. It was surprising that only a few minutes ago he'd mistaken her lack of resistance for weakness, which she was anything but. Here she was, bloodied and blackened flesh crusting her hip like a crime scene, vowing to protect someone else.

“You won't be able to stop him.”

“You don't know him like I do.”

“I'm so sorry, Margot,” he choked out, sympathy stinging his eyes, blurring his sight. He moved to release her hand, draw back into himself and his cell, but she dug her nails in.

“Don't let go,” she pleaded, and he allowed her to entangle their fingers once more, the candlelight making her eyes look dark and wet. “I know you couldn't do anything. Just don't let go.”

Stretching back onto the floor, he curled up beside the bars, his arm protruding through them, an anchor in Margot's storm. This seemed to be something recurring, and he couldn't imagine what it must've been like for her, unable to turn to anyone with real power for help because her abuser *was* the real power. He was truly a monster like nothing Will had seen before, so power-hungry and drunk on authority, and entirely set on exploiting it. At the cost of his own *sister*.

What a joke. What sick, gruesome joke.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blood welled in his shoulder wound like brimming tears, ripping screams from his throat as Verger toyed with his already injured and weak body. The scalpel dipped in further, arching against damaged, inflamed flesh and making him yell louder; long, piercing sounds that ended with unceremonious sobs, tapering off into nothingness. Bolts of agony coursed across his shoulders, and colours danced behind his eyes, dripping red and fairytale pink, the colours of flesh and blood and anatomy.

This was no fairytale.

This was a story where the evil *won*, where the evil had been winning for almost a century, prevailing annually. This was a story with torture and imprisonment, children's lives ending not with bangs, but with whimpers.

“Kill me,” he begged, and Verger only laughed above him, face twisting in with the psychedelic rainbow in his head, weaving in and out of his predatory smile, the glint of his teeth.

“Now that would be cheating.”

The scalpel dug in harder, and his scream leapt so high he could no longer hear it, silent with its devastating destruction. He arched under the probing of the blade, tears falling hard and heavy with Verger's ministrations, longing to actually be back in the Games, of all things. Back then, it was simply fighting to the death. Torture was uncommon, despite it happening on the odd occasion with tributes like Gray, and at least he'd be likely to escape that fate if he was still a tribute.

Back then, Hannibal was alive.

Given the choice between his cell and the arena, he'd choose the arena in a heartbeat. What the world had come to was a mystery to him.

“We'll avoid your face, I promise,” Verger whispered, the words fanning across Will's eyelids, that shut on instinct. “Wouldn't want to ruin that.”

Squirming against his bindings, he desperately wanted rid of the finger Verger was trailing along his jaw. His touch felt like poison, licking along his skin, permeating and toxic.

What Verger had done down there, it had been a performance, one for Will's benefit. Why make the effort to go to Margot instead of bringing her here himself? It was a performance, a threat, a warning.

If you don't behave, this will be you, defiled and humiliated. Marked forever.

Maybe it wasn't even about behaviour. Maybe it was just when Verger inevitably got bored, which Will suspected was fairly early on with Margot, meaning that Will's time would come soon enough. When Will became repetitive, Verger would only find a new way to torment him, and the cycle would begin again. What he had waiting in store for him was even less pleasant than the ordeal he was experiencing now.

Talk about the light at the end of the tunnel.

“Come on, Will,” Verger hissed. “Say *something*.”

Through the slits of his half-open eyes, he saw the light obscured by a dark, travelling line. As the crop came down to smack against his ribs, he held in a breath, preparing for the pain to come. The breath caught like a trapped bird, fluttering inside him, wings beating a rhythm against his bones. It was like a hot brand, scorching across his skin as it hit, sore and violent. There was no flinching away or hiding where he was, strapped down and spread out, a canvas of bruises and blood for Verger to perfect, painting and sculpturing with his weapons. It all hurt so *much*. What he wouldn't give not to hurt anymore.

Looking at Verger's towering form, his pale, gaunt face, obscuring the blinding lights above them, it all reminded Will of Matthew Brown. Brown, peering over him while thunder crashed and lightning struck, violation inked in his palms, where they'd pried at Will's clothes. It had been over a year ago now, a lifetime, a milisecond. Would he prefer to be back there, far away from all of this? Maybe he'd be able to stop it, change the course of history, securing his place at home in District 4 and not returning to the Games. Not ending up here.

It was different, back then. He'd had many advantages he didn't have now.

Hannibal had saved him. Hannibal.

“Hannibal,” he breathed, entirely involuntarily. It came out like smoke, wanting, lasting.

“*Hannibal*,” Verger repeated, *mocked*, lips pulling back in a cruel smirk. He tilted his head in false sympathy, teeth bared like a predator about to pounce. “Do you miss him?”

The tug of his heart was almost as painful as the scalpel still lodged in his shoulder wound and the smarting red lines that the crop had left behind. Almost. He bit his tongue instead of answering, and rather than the smoking anger he'd expected, there was only amusement in Verger's smug face. Will wanted to hit him, feel skull cave in and hear his teeth rattle.

If Verger was like Brown, what else was he capable of? Will certainly wouldn't put it past him. There was a reason he'd assumed what he had last night, before even witnessing what was happening. Something about it, the way he looked at her, the way he'd straddled her, touched her, left her exposed. It was meaningful, all part of his performance. Everything had been. Will just had to look harder, see harder, see *more*.

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish he was still alive?”

“Yes.”

“Do you blame yourself?”

The crop came down again. Someone twisted the scalpel.

It felt as if there were a fish hook in his chest, yanking every so often, drawing screams from him like breaths. Verger held the line, the puppet strings, the crop and the scalpel all at once. In his head, fire curled throughout his brain, leaving an empty wreck behind, whiting out his vision, spine curving as if hit by electric. There were parts of him that no longer felt present, floating above himself, nothing but a dust particle in the air. He *couldn't* be himself at the moment, not completely. His whole body was seized with unbearable agony, muscles in never-ending spasms, desperately seeking refuge from Verger's competent hands.

The tears seemed to burn his face, trailing red-hot flames down his cheeks, a blazing inferno that he couldn't make sense of. Perhaps the world would not end in ice.

“Yes.”

A point pressed against the inside of his thigh, the soft, sensitive flesh there, mapped with veins and arteries twisting along like blue rivers. The point continued, sinking past his skin, and if Will hadn't glanced down, he wouldn't have known it was a needle, a syringe filled with a clear, threatening liquid. It barely registered in comparison to the immense intensity of the scalpel and the crop, which he worried were working their way through layers and layers of skin, going until they reached his centre, his core, bluebells and blood protected by strands of stardust.

Sighs slipped from his lips as the liquid was pushed forward, swirling into his bloodstream, thick like the honey of Hannibal's eyes. What it was, he didn't know, but at this point he'd take anything, try anything, as long as it gave him release from the pain. Numbness spread from his thigh the minute the liquid made contact with his blood, paralysis climbing his frame like the tide coming in.

“He'd never forgive you, you know,” Verger whispered, callous and conversational. “He'd never forgive your weakness. Your sacrifice.”

The sea crashed against the rocks, rolled up the beach, splashing the sand, and Will went under.

***

When the sea drifted back and he awoke, it was alone on the cold, hard cobblestones of his cell. His usual meal tray sat by the door, and he was barely conscious for a few seconds before the emptiness of his stomach hit him. Scrambling over to the tray, he wolfed down the little portions of fruit and nuts he was given, gulping the water to soothe his dry throat. How long had he been out for? More than just a few hours, surely- that wouldn't usually illicit a

response like this from his body. He paused from his feasting to cast his eyes around the area, a little confused by the lack of all sound.

Margot's cell was empty.

He immediately wanted to bring the food back up, hit by a wave of fearful nausea at her absence. She'd only been branded last night, what was so urgent that Verger had to inflict it on her now? Could he not wait a few days? His mind raced with the sinister possibilities, the red and black, peeling mark on her side only increasing in size and severity. It had looked so very angry, a brand holding such a meaning and importance behind it, plastered onto her flesh forever. She would never be able to forget her brother, no matter what happened here, if by some miracle she survived and he passed. He would always be lurking, waiting for whenever she looked down. He'd moulded himself to her, private and intimate, eternal.

And Will would be next.

It was then that the doors crashed open, the guards slinging a half-conscious Margot along behind them, her feet painfully bumping over the stony ground. Her consciousness flew to full as she was practically thrown into her cell, landing with a thump on her bloodied knees. Will was there in an instant, dropping his tray to crawl to the bars, concern flooding into him.

“Are you okay?” he questioned, gentle, and she shook her head, trembling as she shifted up.

“It hurts,” she mumbled.

Blood streaked her arms and legs, wet confetti. Will watched it drip down her like rain, torrential and eroding as it went. Again, the brutality was astounding, undeserving but intended to be artful. What Verger did wasn't art. If Hannibal had seen it he would've been furious, disgusted at the crudeness and the raw lack of subtlety, the insult it was to real artistry. He'd liked high culture, Will remembered, was fascinated by the golden frames that lined the mansion walls, entranced by the colourful music of the string quartet that had stood on stage. Even the wine had been a topic of discussion he'd been more than willing to engage in with the finely dressed men of the Capitol, their cheeks flushed with tipsy enjoyment.

“All art is quite useless,” he'd whispered to Will one morning of the Victory tour, tracing the freckles on his shoulder, speaking in response to one of Will's remarks about the inflammatory nature of a certain portrait on the train, depicting a victor standing atop a pile of skulls.

“What does that mean?”

“It means whatever you want.” He'd smiled at him, the emerging sun on a cloudy day. “It's to be interpreted. They aren't my words.”

“Whose words are they?”

“Oh, I don't know,” he murmured. “They must've been written years ago now, and I'm sure the Capitol destroyed whatever source they came from. They've only been passed on by word

of mouth. They are beautiful, though. Surely written by some wild, defiant man, who only saw life as a frivolous joy to experience."

"At least he had the freedom to do so, I suppose."

"I'm not so sure about that. Perhaps we've never been free."

"As a species? Surely there must've been a time we had will of our own."

"Not as a species. As a civilisation."

The beam of morning light on his face had made his eyelashes translucent, his eyes a light brown, boring into Will's. It had been a nondescript morning, just another day travelling, and Will hadn't quite remembered it until now. Hannibal saw death as art, a useless form of beauty and aestheticism that caused him great joy. He saw Gray's canvas of bodies as art. What had occurred to Margot, however, was vulgar. Bruises ringed along her arms, fingerprints like smudges on her porcelain skin, and blood dripped from her thighs. The brand was on display, exposed to the air where her rags were torn open suggestively, the sore looking curls of burnt flesh visible even in the dim light.

"How's your side?" he asked, soft.

"Oh, he didn't hurt me there. Wouldn't want to ruin the set of it," she remarked wryly, examining the fresh marks on her body, running a finger through patches of half-congealed blood. "It's healing as it should. Lucky me."

"How long were you there for? I only just woke up."

"Hours," she whispered. "Closer to a day. A *while*."

"You were awake the whole time?" he gently pried, eyes tracking the movement of her testing hands, feeling flashes of pity as she winced.

"It's more fun if I am. He likes to hear me scream."

"He likes to hear me, too," he murmured, reaching through the bars. She slid her hand into his, but looked doubtful.

"He likes to watch the betrayal in my eyes."

Sometimes, he forgot. Verger was her brother. To her, he was and always would be *Mason*, the boy she grew up with, played with, most likely loved, at some point. Before he became this. Betrayal would've been an apt word for it, no matter how she hated him now. He was still her brother. Even now, there was a hint of *something* as she looked at their joined hands. A pain that was different to Will's, one that ran deep.

"I'm sorry. It must be hard."

Clearing her throat, she snatched her hand back, receding to her cell as the vulnerability in her eyes drew back like a dog brought to heel. Embarrassment replaced her helpless sorrow,

defences slamming up to protect herself. Will didn't think it was personal to him. It must've been a sensitive subject, to say the least.

“It's fine. I don't care. I stopped loving him years ago.”

Will was sure that was true. But some level of attachment remained, some biological connection that would always remain, no matter how she hated him. Which she did, clearly, loathing written all over her face as she settled on the ground, pulling what little clothing material she had over her body and her brand. Will was sure they'd both be screaming tonight, the nightmares inescapable after their eventful experiences upstairs.

His hand still lay in her cell, where she had dropped it like it were on fire. He rolled it into a fist, feeling his knuckles press against the stones.

“He's still your brother.”

“I wish he wasn't.”

“Margot-”

“Goodnight, Will.”

Her hair looked like Molly's in the candlelight. He didn't say it back.

Chapter End Notes

'all art is quite useless' is of course a quote from my beloved oscar wilde. I couldn't resist!

Chapter 6

Time flies when you're having fun.

That was the old saying, wasn't it? Will *wasn't* having fun, but then he had no concept of time at all anymore. It felt like he'd been down here for *years*, had acclimated to the odd schedule of visiting the torture room a few times a week and being near-starved and sleeping on the cold ground the other days. The more glimpses he caught of his own reflection, in mirrors or reflective torture instruments, the more haggard and ashen he began to look. It was near-skeletal, his eyes shadowed by dark circles and his cheeks sunken and hollow. Even worse was the ribs he could clearly see, protruding from his chest whenever he glanced down, capitalising on his seconds of privacy while Verger had his back turned. It had to have been a while, for him to have lost that amount of weight during his time here. It was almost disturbing.

How long would it take him to die?

Verger was feeding him, to be fair, enough to keep him alive, just not enough to keep him healthy or satisfied. The growling of his desperate stomach's plight was a familiar sound now, and he'd nearly gotten used to eating so little. If they ever gave him a larger meal, he was at a loss for how he'd manage to eat more than a few morsels. After the Games, the first time, he'd been at the hands of experts who knew how to wean him back onto food, having done it before with all the other victors. Without them, Will would have gorged himself, knowing how much food was available to him if he only asked. It wouldn't have ended well with his shrunken stomach capacity.

Now, he would never get out. Those experts were the very same ones that were *keeping* him here, *preventing* him from getting out. If by some miracle he ever did escape, they wouldn't be there to help him with the transition. He would *never* get out. He would never see Abigail again, or Beverly, or his mother. Where were they, now? Did they think he was dead, or were they aware he was here?

Were they even alive?

If they weren't, if he had any concrete proof they were gone, he didn't think he'd last much longer. What was the point? Hannibal was gone, and if they were too, then life wasn't worth living. Not a life like this, where all he knew was pain. He was clinging to life for his family, for the tiny chance he'd be freed from Verger's grasp and find them, but if not… well. Fashioning a noose from his rags didn't seem too hard. The horizontal bars at the top of his cell door would hold his weight, he was sure. He'd had enough time to think about it, after all. It was a last resort, but it was an option.

“How long has it been?” he asked once, voice rasping, sore from screaming.

“A while,” Verger answered, cleaning the scalpel with disinfectant that was passed to him by Cordell, a darkened presence in the corner of the room. Will often forgot he was here, Carlo too, as Verger was always the one in control, always the one holding the knife.

“How long do I have?”

“To live?” he asked, a smirk forming. “Oh, I don't know. I don't plan these things. It could be a year, it could be a day. We'll see.”

“How will you do it?”

“My, aren't you *inquisitive* today,” he remarked, mostly to himself. “Do you have any preferences?”

“Is there any possibility of a painless death?”

Verger snorted, turning back to his cleaning, a clear answer. Will would be suffering, no matter how he went, whether by Verger's hand or his own. Verger's would be dark and bloody, and his would be excruciating and prolonged, a quiet hanging in the bowels of the President's mansion. He would be another forgotten victor.

“If I say yes, will you do something for me?”

Now *that* was unexpected. What did he possibly have to offer Verger?

“I think I'll have to do it anyway.”

Verger smiled, genuine and serene, perhaps the first display of authenticity Will had ever witnessed from him. There was a clink as he placed the scalpel on the weapons tray, as metal hit metal, as finality made itself known.

“You do know me, Will,” he said, and the sound of his first name from Verger's lips made Will feel sick. “Yes, you'll have to do it. But I'm a generous man, so I will give you this: Miss Katz is alive.”

“What.”

It came out like a rush of air, and his heart soared in his chest, hope and fear and joy encompassing him like a storm.

“There is a rebel alliance set on destroying Panem and the Capitol. We don't know *how*, exactly, but they rescued her and your other allies from the arena before you fell. She's half-leading them, from what we hear. A symbol of hope, or something,” Verger dismissed, sneering, but it was all music to Will's ears. “We don't know where they are. We hope you can help us with that.”

“How? I… I don't know anything about this, honestly. I can't-”

“Like I said, Will, I'm a generous man. I'm also a reasonable one. I'm aware you have no knowledge on this- you would have admitted it already. I broke you a long time ago. What I want is an interview.”

“An interview?”

“Appear on screen with Frederick Chilton. Let him interview you. Answer in favour of the Capitol and against the rebels.”

“*Why*? What *good* will that do?” he asked, and Verger paused, considering. There was a hesitation that Will hadn't seen before, as he weighed the decision to reveal anymore in his head. “If you don't tell me, I won't do it.”

“You will,” Verger said, convinced. “Whether you like it or not. It won't be my preferred television appearance, but you will appear. And refusing will cost you.”

“Why?”

“Because it will *get them here*,” he admitted in a flurry of breath. “They'll see you in the state you're in, and launch some ridiculous rescue mission now they know you're alive. That plays *very* nicely into my hands.”

“You're going to kill them,” Will realised in horror. “*No*. I won't help you with that-”

“Oh, you most certainly will. Because you'll be on television whether you like it or not. But you can control the outcome,” Verger explained. “If you do the interview, all the rebels will see is an undernourished and exhausted individual. They may even infer torture, but what they will not see is any immediate danger.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning Miss Katz then comes into play. And this is where it gets *really* fun,” he began. “She isn't combat trained. Many rebels are. With no immediate danger, its far more possible she can be convinced to stay behind and let the professionals do the work. If you say no… then, we force you on screen. You'll be bloody and broken with a gun to your head. Now, you know her better than I do, so tell me: will she be convinced to stay behind then?”

Silence settled in the room, and sunk through Will's bones, flooding heaviness into his system. This had been thought through. It had been meticulously planned.

“No,” he bit out, “she won't.”

“Rebels will lose their lives when they come to save you, no matter what you choose to do. But this is your decision, Will Graham,” Verger clarified. “Her life, or theirs?”

“Please,” he whispered.

Pleading was a mistake. For a minute, Verger had treated him like an equal, had *requested* rather than demanded, even though he hadn't needed to. He could've forced Will to comply. He *would*, if Will resisted. But he hadn't. Instead, Will had been offered a choice, and terrible as it was, it was arguably the most he'd been able to extend his free will in a very long time. Here, with Will's desperate plea, their situation came hurtling back to reality: Verger was the one with the power. Will could beg all he wanted, but it showed weakness, which Verger only enjoyed eliciting, not satisfying. He almost saw as the doors closed on any agency

whatsoever, Verger's open, conversational expression twisting into a sneer, a mockery at Will's vulnerability. He had blown it.

“What will it be?”

“I think you know,” he hissed, fury and fear building inside him. “Just give me your word. This is all there is. Beverly won't be involved.”

“I give you my word.”

***

Being pressed into a starch suit after wearing loose, grubby fabrics wrapped around himself for what felt like forever, was an uncomfortable experience, to say the least. He looked out of place, felt out of place, a bruised and skinny teenager surrounded by the bright colourful styles of the film crew. Not only them, but the room itself was decked out in extravagance, exactly how Will had remembered this place to be- the Capitol didn't know the meaning of *less is more*. It was a culture shock from the darkness of his cell, however, which was perhaps the most drab place in the universe. None of that mattered, though. Not when he could see the outside world, the skyscrapers and shining lights of the Capitol rising behind the window, and even beyond that, the endless hills of Panem. Real grass. Real sunlight. He hadn't seen it in an eternity.

If only he were seeing it under different circumstances; the situation wasn't exactly ideal, forced on screen and under a layer of make up and editing distortion from the Capitol.

The cameras on him were an unwelcome certainty.

He felt picked apart, a microscope focus on him and the damage caused to him recently, the weight loss and injuries far plainer in the daylight. Chilton frowned when he saw him, brow twitching imperceptibly at his diminished appearance. But behind Chilton stood Verger, a steadfast and overbearing presence lurking in the corner, hidden from the cameras. Chilton couldn't say a word even if he wanted to. There was probably a script he had to stick to.

“So, Will, there's a question on everyone's minds. What happened there, at the end?”

“I… It's blurry. The others went in the opposite direction, and me and Hannibal dealt with Dolar- Francis, I mean. I honestly expected to die, and I never meant for anything like this to happen. I really don't remember much from after we fell. When I woke up… I was here.”

“Did you really fall? There's been some speculation, you see. The public are curious.”

“We fell,” he affirmed, not really caring if Verger had a preferred answer he give to that. “I'd never hurt Hannibal.”

“Well,” Chilton sighed, “I think we've all seen enough of you two to believe that. I have to admit… I shed a tear, after finding out about his death.”

Will's throat closed up as wetness sprang to his eyes. He hadn't expected to talk about Hannibal, had barely thought about him in weeks, really. It was easier to ignore the crushing

loss, the dull ache that grew inside of him, the nauseating rush of rose-tinted memories, when it wasn't on his mind. Swallowing, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat and tried to work past the words that were stuck on the edge of his tongue.

“Yeah,” he said, and nearly flinched when Chilton's hand came out to brush his, a comfort under the hot lights and hot eyes of everyone in the room. “So did I.”

“How are you, Will?”

“I've been better,” he mumbled, pain creeping into his voice. “I'm. He's… He was important to me. And losing him wasn't fun. I don't really want to…”

“Of course,” Chilton said, hastily removing his hand and repositioning himself on his own chair, folding one leg over the other as he pondered his next words. “That isn't why you're here today, is it?”

“No,” he replied, now with a little more confidence. This was what he'd been prepared for. This was what he was here to do. Lead people to their deaths. Lead *heroes* to their deaths. “I'm here to talk to Beverly. To the rebels.”

“What would you like to say?”

“Stop. Please stop.” He turned to one of the cameras, breathing deeply before speaking again, inhaling air fresher and lighter than anything he'd breathed in Verger's captivity. “We don't want a war on our hands. That's the *last* thing we want. Don't do anything rash.”

“Thank you, Will,” Chilton murmured, but leant forward a little, imploring. “There isn't anything else you'd like to say? Anything more… personal?”

To Beverly, he meant, *manipulate her*. Will wasn't sure how much power she had there, but it could be a fair amount. She could stop them from harming the Capitol, potentially. She could play right into Verger's hands.

“Bev… I know things have been hard,” he uttered, choosing his words carefully. “But we've seen enough death. Enough horror. Enough for a *lifetime*. Violence won't solve anything. Please. You have to trust me.”

It was all lies. Will had dreamt too fondly of revolution to believe any of the words leaving his lips, and Bev would know it. He was no pacifist, not after the Games. The fury he felt toward Verger and the rest of the Capitol was too powerful to be confined to a diplomatic solution. Dictators couldn't be stopped through talk of a peaceful solution- in another world, a luckier world, Will would be standing side by side with the rebels, joining them on their charge against injustice.

“I promise,” he added, a half-whisper, guilt settling in his gut as he knew the impact of the words, the weight they held. He'd never broken a promise to Bev, even the one that had practically promised him to death. He'd upheld it. Twice.

It would settle it for her. He was not being controlled, not entirely. The words and promises were his own, even if he did look worn and unwilling. It was perhaps enough to let her know he was safe *enough*, that he wouldn't be dead anytime soon, which was what Verger correctly believed was enough to keep her away from the rescue mission. Verger was there now, hovering behind the camera, smirking at Will's performance. He had won, after all. It hadn't taken much for Will to agree to his idea, and according to Verger's expression, he had delivered beautifully.

And people would die because of it.

“Fantastic, Will,” Verger suddenly interjected, sauntering across the room and across the line of the camera, now visible to anybody watching. Will stiffened, a little confused. He had assumed Verger would stay out of sight until the interview was over, and so had Chilton, if his bewildered frown was anything to go by. “Quite an actor, aren't you?”

“Mr President,” Chilton uttered, looking a little nervous. “The cameras-”

“Have now been stopped from broadcasting. To the main channels, at least. But rebel frequencies...” He trailed off, triumph standing proud on his face. “They'll see all of this.”

“All of what?” Will asked, but he didn't need an expert to tell him that it was something bad.

Verger grinned, and it was so alike to the grin he wore in that room full of torture that Will knew. He'd recognise that grin anywhere, the fluorescence of the lights glinting off Verger's teeth, the predatory plainness of knowing exactly who his enemy was. There was no fear of the unknown. Will saw all. He saw as Verger's arm came into view, no longer behind his back, the hand there holding a dripping syringe of amber liquid; it tripped his silhouette into some childish rendition of a mad doctor, an overdone attempt at horror. But it instilled fear nonetheless. Irrational, innocent fear.

Rising above it was something far darker. Something primal and violent.

Beverly.

If Verger injected him, that would equal immediate danger. What was in that syringe could be *anything*, and Will knew if Bev had any power at all she'd insist on a rescue mission even if he was dead long before they arrived. He *knew* her. Her morality would maker her *try*, at the least. Try to save all and anybody she could. If Bev came, however, entered this warzone where Verger was most definitely out to get her, then she didn't stand a chance of survival. But wouldn't squirming away make him seem all the more trapped, all the more in danger? It was an impossible choice, but almost on reflex he attempted to launch himself away from Verger in fear, before being tackled to the ground by Carlo, wrists pinned and neck exposed. Verger crouched down beside him where he lay on the floor, tender as he smoothed back Will's curls from his forehead, stroked a finger down his cheek.

“You gave me your word,” Will said, betrayed, broken. Bev's life was at stake, and he hadn't saved her.

“I lied,” Verger admitted happily, shaking his head at Will's foolishness. “I'm a politician, Will.”

Will gasped as the needle slid into his throat, as the liquid inside was pushed into his bloodstream, as dizziness began to make itself known, flying through his head almost immediately. If only the Districts had access to concoctions that worked as fast as this, then maybe not as many would die, be it from illness, starvation or the cold. Above him, he could see Chilton, still frozen in his chair, shocked at the sudden manifestation of Verger's cold ruthlessness in broad daylight. Perhaps he truly hadn't known the harm that the Capitol did daily. Perhaps he was another clueless and fickle innocent like the rest of them.

His vision of Chilton became obscured as his eyelids closed, finally, heavy with artificial sleep.

Rest. Peace.

Chapter 7

Stags meant power. Stags meant protection. Stags meant pride.

It stood beside him, humbling in its unmoving stance, its eyes fixed on Will where he sat, legs dangling over the edge an abyss. He could almost feel the drop below, a sickening freefall, an exhilarating thrill ride. The endlessness seemed to creep upwards, phantom hands drawing him into the darkness, beckoning, encouraging, wanting. Emptiness was hungry. Emptiness fed- it was the only thing it *could* do. Eat and eat until it was full, which it never was. Emptiness was much like loss.

Weren't they just synonymous?

Hooves shifted in the grass next to him, and the wind whirled both below and above him, twisting around the swirling mist, invisible in the nothingness. This was what it was to be alive. Peace, balancing on the edge of a cliff, the tip of a knife, the width of a fingernail. Teetering over the chasm, which was both appealing and frightening, a contradicting enigma that Will wanted to fall into headfirst. Temptation had never been his downfall before. It was funny that it would be this time.

“You killed him, you know?”

“I know.”

“I'd forgive you. If I was alive,” Abigail whispered, perched the other side of him, staring out to a horizon that only she could see. “I might not be.”

“It's likely,” Will admitted.

“Will you miss me?”

“More than anything,” he uttered, voice ragged as he thought of the implications of her death. Losing Abigail would be the worst possible outcome of this entire thing. It would make all of it pointless, surely? But then, was anything pointless if it spared Abigail's life? Even if it only prolonged it, didn't it still *mean* something? “I can't lose you.”

“And what if you do?” she questioned. “What then?”

Her hand found his, pressing their palms together and brushing his fingers briefly before pulling away, leaving something sitting in his grasp. Unfurling his fingers, he saw that it was a tiny, crushed bluebell. It didn't represent anything, as far as he knew, but it was what she had given him. It was his token, his only reminder of Abigail and his only reminder of home, and he had kept it close and treasured it as if it were an extension of his very own soul.

“You killed him, you know?” she asked again, and Will's stomach lurched, and then so did his feet.

The stag was behind him, now, its antlers pushing ceaselessly against his back until the ledge dropped from under him and he fell, tumbling into the void below, heart soaring at the intensity of liberation, something he hadn't felt since that night under the stars with Hannibal and Dolarhyde. It felt like years ago, now. It felt like the person who'd been there wasn't the same person who was here now, surrounding himself with darkness and *enjoying* it. Verger's torture had let him lose himself in the chaos, and he felt like only a shadow of his former self. An afterthought, slipping through the cracks in his rapidly deteriorating mind.

Falling was freeing. It got the wind ruffling through his hair and cold air on his face, waking him up from some groggy, weighed-down slumber that he'd been stuck in.

He wasn't dead yet.

He was *alive*.

Despite Verger's efforts, he was alive, and he'd be a fool to waste it. If there was a rescue mission, there was a small chance that the rebels would prevail, and make it to the cells without alerting Verger and his guards. There was a small chance they would retrieve Will and Margot, and an even smaller chance that they would escape unnoticed, and make it back to wherever the rebels were based. Small chances, but chances nonetheless. Will wouldn't waste his life locked away at the bottom of Verger's mansion, a prisoner unknown to Panem. He had to fight. He had to at least *see* if Abigail was alive, because there was no use lamenting wasted years trying to save her if she wasn't even gone, if those years had *paid off,* and she was now warm and safe somewhere with his mother.

Fall as he might, the ascent would come.

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A thundering bang, shaking the ceiling above him, was what awoke him from his drug-induced sleep. Dust fluttered down, sprinkling his face as he registered his surroundings. Even after all this time, he'd often wake up with the notion that he was anywhere but here, his subconscious aiming to protect him in his dreams and make him forget the truth of his situation. Disappointment would by lying in wait for him, in the steel bars that trapped him and the stones he lay on. It would gut him every time, snatch his breath and let his stomach drop as he forced back tears, longing for simpler days following the river to the sea and waking in bed next to Hannibal, basking in the light of the clear sun.

Now, he'd wake with a dry mouth and aching back, seeing nothing but the dark and cold.

It would happen every time, and today was no exception, and as he heaved himself to sit up, he saw Margot curled up the way she usually was, eyes staring into nothing. It was almost routine, by now. What else did they have to keep themselves sane? Some things had to remain, and those were the terrible conditions they lived in and their own exhaustive repetitions.

“What was that?” he whispered.

“I don't know,” she answered, voice like soft ash, the words falling from her mouth like she was desperate to rid herself of them. “It's been happening for a while.”

“Do you think-”

“Probably,” she said, and hope leapt in him. She must've seen it in his face, curving his expression into a wide smile, and threw him a pitying gaze, almost involuntarily. “Will… they won't even make it down here. Mason will stick his guards on them and they'll be dead before they make it past the lobby. It's a shame, but it's true. They don't stand a chance.”

“But… I need to get *out*,” he replied, hope fizzling away to panic as quickly as it had originally appeared. He'd known it was unlikely he'd be freed, but the reality of it was a depressing one. A daunting one, too: this was his future. He'd barely last much longer, and he wasn't sure he *wanted* to after a failed escape attempt.

“I'm sorry,” Margot murmured back, weighed down with sorrow. She'd heard no news of Alana, as far as Will knew. She could be dead, which they were both aware was a strong possibility. But if Margot knew for sure, Will worried what she might do. In her dreams, sometimes, Alana's name would dance through the silence, a whisper on her lips, and it was confirmation enough that she was the only thing keeping Margot going. What else did she have to live for? What other family did she have? Her sadistic brother?

Another crash came from upstairs, and more dust fell, but now Will only sighed. Margot was right, and getting his hopes up wouldn't do him any good. It would only make it harder when Verger inevitably reappeared downstairs and informed them of their dead friends. But Bev was likely up there, which was the part that hurt the most. Would she survive it, or be boxed down here with him and Margot? And what of the other innocent lives?

As the pain began to swell inside him, the doors crashed open, spilling dust in bigger quantities.

“Will?”

It was muffled, indistinct through the ringing of his ears and thrumming of his blood. Through hazy confusion he watched as a woman stepped through the dust, gracefully moving forward, a tall silhouette in the darkness. She emerged from the darkness and into the candlelight, stepping up to their cells, shoes clicking on the floor. When he saw her face, he thought perhaps he might be hallucinating. It was a face he hadn't seen in an extremely long time, a face he'd only seen in his dreams.

I have a feeling that our paths will cross again, she had said, and then she had died. It was unmistakeable. Her face had been beamed into the sky for everyone to see, an eerie phantom of a girl who used to be alive.

But she hadn't died, because she was standing *right there*.

“Am *I* dead?” he asked her, peering up at Chiyoh where she stood just in front of the bars, fiddling with the lock to his cell. Glancing over to Margot, he saw that she was gazing at her in shock too, hand trembling where it sat on the ground.

His heart was tripping in his chest, his body paralysed with astonishment. Chiyoh had *died*. She had died in the *arena*, where it was impossible to escape the watchful eye of the Gamemakers. But how did it make sense that she was here now, saving him? Pale skin and jet black hair, lips as red as cherries. Will would recognise her anywhere, but especially in the dark. Especially at night. It was another place, after all, just as she had said. A strand of hair fell from where it was loosely tied behind her head, brushing past her cheek as she focused on the lock, using a thin metal spike poking through and working the mechanism, patiently effective under her quiet ministrations. He and Margot didn't dare say a word, eyes fixed on her in hopeful horror.

“Will?”

This voice was clearer, more familiar, twisted with a thick accent. The doors still hung open, revealing the wide corridor behind, only blocked by a figure that stood in the light, their outline striking something in Will that he'd almost forgotten. There was a tug just below his navel, a breathless recognition, a sweet reminder of home, of everything he had missed. Their steps across the room ticked by, hours on a clock.

“*Will.”* His name came a third time, just as Chiyoh clicked open the lock on the cell door, shifting over to Margot's cell. The figure strode from the doorway and was by his cell in seconds, throwing open the door with a heaving exhale, relieved and surprised all at once. They both paused for a moment, time passing by almost audibly.

“Hannibal?”

Before he knew it, he was engulfed in a pair of strong, sorely missed arms, the sweet, warm smell of blood and sweat invading the air around him in a sudden wave. His breath caught in his throat, confusion clouding his lungs. It *couldn't* be Hannibal. Hannibal was *dead*. But the smell of him, the feel of him, it was indisputable, resolute. Will had woken up next to him for weeks on end, *months* if he counted the days in the Games and totalled it all up. Will had kissed him, over and over until he was numb from it. Hannibal knew him better than he knew himself, and he knew Hannibal. Knew him better than anyone alive, only rivalled by Chiyoh and Bedelia. They paled in comparison, though, he knew, he saw. Hannibal's face when he looked at Will was an image burned into his mind, printed onto the inside of his eyelids, always replaying. The hopeless, helpless devotion. The disbelieving fondness. The yearning, swelling possessiveness. He'd hold it close in the dark like a crushed bluebell, his token, his light in the darkness that was constantly there.

It was dark now, in the crook of Hannibal's neck, where he had buried his face. Hannibal had crouched in front of him to embrace him, but was now shaking against him, quivering like a frightened child as his hands clutched at Will's back, his grip desperate and blindly seeking. Will felt a pang of hesitant affection, weighed down by patient bewilderment. Hannibal's hair was soft against his forehead. His breath was laboured, hushed.

Was this another of Verger's sick games? Was this some mutt, disguised as Hannibal to simply torture him more?

“Will Graham,” the mutt choked out, pulling back to cup his face, eyes impossibly tender, “the great love of my life.”

Tears tracked his cheeks, overflowing from his adoring eyes, relief simply radiating off him. Will watched the teardrops catch themselves in his eyelashes, and he knew. Verger was aware of the words, as he'd heard them on camera with the rest of Panem, but he couldn't recreate Hannibal's ardent sincerity as he said them. It was something entirely unique, only his, and therefore Will would recognise it anywhere. Especially accompanied by those words, a sentence he'd said to Will only a handful of times, a touching endearment that never failed to make him melt.

This wasn't a mutt at all.

This was Hannibal.

This was the love of *his* life.

Hannibal was leaning forward with a gasp, their foreheads pressing together, yet more tears spilling down his cheeks, drops trickling like rainwater. His eyes were screwed shut, disbelieving, and his hands were unconsciously mapping Will's body, getting the feel of him again, re-familiarising himself with the lines and curves of Will's shoulders and torso. His chest hitched with every inhale, and only stopped when Will pushed their mouths together, breath ceasing entirely.

I love you, Will thought fervently, hands grasping at the front of Hannibal's shirt, needing something to ground themselves. He was terrified and clueless of the situation occurring, whatever that may be, and kissing Hannibal was all he could do to feel the calm, the crash of the sea against the rocks, the endless consistency of the moon. Kissing Hannibal was like coming home. Kissing Hannibal was the only real thing he knew.

“Hannibal,” someone said, impatient and irritated, if their voice was anything to go by. “We need to go.”

Hannibal didn't pull away, didn't even acknowledge the attempted interruption, just kept running his hands through Will's hair and letting warm tears fall from his eyes onto Will's face. There was some frenzied, panicked freedom in the way he was kissing back, like no way he'd ever kissed back before. But then he hadn't thought Will was dead, before. Where their mouths met, there was nothing but solace, a suture to the wound, the deep pain inside him that had been growing since hed first arrived here. It was all over now, and only the fresh promise of safety remained, a constant as they continued kissing.

The stag waited by the door, a steady and watchful protector.

Chapter 8

Days passed in daze.

For a while, darkness was all there was, a sea of stars above him as he was jostled from side to side, head balanced on the warmth of someone's legs. There was cold everywhere, the chill permeating his clothes and the blanket that had been laid upon him, still not enough to protect against the irritants of the outside world, a world he hadn't touched while being stuck in the dank dungeon of their psychotic leader. There was no change in temperature, but he became accustomed to it after a while. He was just grateful for the breeze on his skin, the comforting hum of the engine below him, the buzz of conversation around him. It was real and it was true. It was everything he needed to feel normal again, one day.

But then came the light. It was blinding, a stark whiteness that he worried would burn his eyes if he opened them fully. Everything was crisp and new, like the beginning of winter. It was natural and raw and in direct contrast to the near-industrial environment of Verger's cells, of Verger's mechanical torture, the scalpels and whips and drugs, dancing through his brain like unforgotten ghosts, far from done haunting their victim.

He would take ghosts over monsters, current and inescapable.

Wherever he was smelt like roses and had a rigid coolness to it that gave him no indication of where he had been taken. He was far too tired to peer through his eyes and see for himself, his eyelids unable to peel themselves open. It was an exhaustion like nothing he'd ever felt before, a fatigue that had sunken down to his very bones. Crisp didn't negate any softness, however, and whatever he was balanced upon was beyond comfortable, dragging him into a sleep deeper than perhaps any he'd ever slept. He needed this, had yearned for it desperately down there, the possibility of future material comfort one of the only things that had kept him sane. And now he was here: the destination he had hoped for. If he died now, he'd die a satisfied man. He'd at least die somewhere other than an unknown cell at the bottom of Verger's mansion.

As he began his re-continued descent into unconsciousness once more, clammy tightness enveloped his hand, which had previously been suspended mid-air, hanging off what he presumed was a bed. But there was no time to dwell on it, sleep's possessive hands already curled around his ankles, waiting in the dark for him. Whatever it was could hold on another few hours.

***

“See?” Hobbs whispered in his ear, and he could only shake him away.

When he turned, however, Hobbs was not there.

Abigail was.

“See?” she said, and her eyes were like his.

Will often forgot who she was and where she came from. She wasn't his sister by blood; they were only related by bond. She had Hobbs' eyes, his nose, his smile, and now Will remembered him so much, too much, he could see it. There was scarce resemblance to her mother, but she looked all too similar to her father. Will could feel it in his gut like a sinking stone.

Her face may have been like his, but her personality wasn't. That was where she inherited features from her mother: her persistent kindness, her graceful mercy, the way she looked at the flowers in the spring. Like light and hope still existed in the world. Like she was grateful to be alive. Like they were the most transcendent beauty she'd ever seen, when they were only spots of rainbow in the green grass, a side effect of nature.

Will was the one who'd gotten his personality from Hobbs.

Biology didn't allow it, but it had occurred nonetheless. Here he was, a murderer. A violent, cruel monster, who had always delighted in blood. Nothing like his father, the wild, lost explorer, who was good right to his core, who would be ashamed to see what his son had become. Not his mother, quiet and helpful, a soldier fighting her ongoing battle that was life. It would break her heart, to know the darkness that was truly in his heart, not just a prop for the cameras. She hadn't raised him to be this man. He was supposed to be better. For his mother, for his father.

For Abigail.

Wasn't it all for her? Wasn't he glad she hadn't been the one to end up with Hobbs' proclivities? Wasn't he willing to shoulder it for her?

Her eyes were her father's.

Her eyes were her own.

She was nobody but herself. The blue of her eyes may have been a gift from her violent ancestors, but the purity resting behind them was not. The dewdrop curiosity when she gazed from their bedroom window at the rising sun was not. She belonged to herself, not Garret Jacob Hobbs, who was now nothing but a figure in Will's memory.

Perhaps it wasn't all bad. It had brought him to Hannibal's side, after all. It gave Abigail salvation.

“I see,” he whispered.

She smiled. It hurt.

***

Hannibal's palms were smooth and baby-soft as they slid into Will's, opposing his own war-torn hands, dotted with scars and cuts and the blemishes of life, some of which had occurred long before he'd volunteered for the Games, remnants of his clumsy childhood. Hannibal's palms were something he, of course, had felt before. Had wanted before. Had loved before. It

meant he recognised them as they touched him, careful and quiet but not clinical, a so uniquely-Hannibal feature that he knew who it was in an instant.

“Will, my darling,” came his voice, even more recognisable in the impossible silence of the room they were in. “Are you awake?”

A part of him wanted to sigh, treating him like a nagging parent unable to understand boundaries, but he knew that was unfair. He was only *tired*, and had missed Hannibal an insane amount, spending nearly all of his time enjoying Verger's hospitality and quietly longing for Hannibal to return to him. So instead, he granted him an unintelligible grunt and encouraged him closer with a tender brush to the inside of his wrist, fingers tripping there, marvelling at the smooth skin and fragile nature Hannibal had confined there. Everyone had it, really, but the idea of Hannibal with a weak spot was jarring, an Achilles heel, an area of his body were veins and arteries and tendons were available, a whole map of his humanity that was hidden underneath his skin.

In response to his pseudo-answer, he heard a relieved sigh, a sad huff, an awkward clearing of the throat. Hannibal was mere seconds away, holding his hand, and Will still couldn't bring himself to look.

“Come here,” he croaked, voice rusty from underuse. Hannibal inhaled sharply at the request, nervous and hesitant, hanging back where he sat, perched in his chair beside Will. Or at least Will assumed that was the layout of the current scenario. “Hannibal, please come here.”

With that, Hannibal was releasing his hand, and for a second there was nothing, and Will thought perhaps he might have left. But then the bed dipped with another's weight, the sheets pulling tight around him as Hannibal manoeuvred himself beside Will, tentative, gentle. His eyes were searching, hastily looking for a reason to withdraw, uncertainly continuing when he found none. As he laid his body beside Will's, he was shaking, his breath trembling with him as he sought the same warmth and familiarity that Will did, the same thing they'd both been missing.

“Will,” he whispered. “Oh, Will.”

Within seconds, Will was burying his head under Hannibal's neck, a gesture of intimacy they both knew all too well. Hannibal was shifting to accommodate him, arms coming around to pull him closer, moulding him to his body, healing the wounds from before, where Verger had severed them so cruelly from one another. A sob hitched from his chest, an exhausted release of emotion, and Hannibal only clutched him tighter in response, peppering kisses on his forehead, to his temples, in his hair.

“How long?” Will managed, through the lump in his throat and tears stinging his eyes.

“Months. Forever,” Hannibal answered, muffled by his curls. Rearing his head back to clear his voice, he spoke again, eyes hooded with intense emotion. “Too long.”

“Where's Margot? Is she-”

“She's safe. She's fine. It's all fine.”

Another kiss was pressed to his skin, this time at the corner of his mouth, a fond afterthought. Will gazed up at him, his great monster, and watched how it loved him. It was him that Hannibal had chosen, him that had Hannibal's full attention, the entire weight of his devotion, an immense thing to carry. It was for this reason that he was here, only safe after months of torture, both physical and psychological. What would've happened if Hannibal had taken an interest in him? Perhaps they would've found each other anyway, considering the universe's sick sense of humour. Or maybe that was just the Gamemakers. But what if Hannibal hadn't volunteered? Will's life could be very different now. He could be dead, for starters. If all had gone to plan, however, he'd be safe and sound in District 4, surrounded by his family with no indication that Hannibal even existed.

Who would he be? Was he anything, without Hannibal? Was he enough?

“He told me you were dead,” he said, hoarse, overspilling with pain. “The whole time. I thought you were dead.”

“I did too,” Hannibal replied, entranced by Will's face, as if he almost couldn't believe he was actually here. “Not quite as certainly, but if the rebels didn't save you, I couldn't envision any possibility of you being alive, even if Verger did rescue you.”

“I was as good as,” Will admitted, and Hannibal's expression hardened, contrasting dramatically from the soft wonder it had held before.

“What did he do to you?”

“Everything you can imagine.”

The fury in the lines of Hannibal's face, his frown and his pout, would be terrifying if Will didn't know that they were aimed to protect him rather than target him. To be on the receiving end of Hannibal's anger… it didn't sound fun. He'd witnessed Hannibal's true rage before, glimpsed it in the fists that had pummelled Matthew Brown, yet again a gift for Will, a possessive reaction to other people's brutality. He had glimpsed it at the mansion.

We need to go.

The words had come from Chiyoh, who eventually took the initiative to tear them away from one another, ushering them onward and stepping back to support Margot as they made their ascent from the cells. In Verger's main banquet hall, of which there were many, far too many for one man, the rebels had gathered. More than he'd expected.

“Well, Lecter?” a voice from the crowd had called, demanding and arrogant, angry, as the group of people towered in front of Verger, who had been smiling up at them dreamily from the ground, eyelids drooping as he did so. Heavy footfalls rung in the distance. “Do we kill him?”

“No,” Hannibal had replied, releasing Will to Chiyoh, who caught him as he stumbled. Hannibal had strode forward and, not pausing for a beat, snapped Verger's neck. It echoed throughout the room with a sickening crack. “There isn't time for what he deserves, and if we murder him here and now the onslaught of military power the Capitol will unleash on us will

be horrifying. I can already hear more soldiers coming, and any minute now the hovercrafts will be involved. We need to go."

"But-"

"*Now*."

"I don't know what Crawford was *thinking* putting you in charge," the man had muttered, rather loudly, but complied anyway, calling the rebels into line and leading them from the room. Will had watched as they broke into a run, not quite registering the urgency himself until Hannibal appeared in his sight, concern creasing his face.

"We need to run," he'd explained. "Can you do that for me? Can you run?"

Aching all over and still bleeding in places he'd never bled in before, he nodded, dizziness coursing through his brain. And then, like a damsel in distress, he'd fainted into Hannibal's arms, the world tilting sideways and cutting to black, a broken circuit laid discarded on the ground. Darkness was all there was.

***

"Can I be with him?" Hannibal asked, his usual smooth tones shaping his voice, but Will knew him. It was the closest he'd ever get to begging with someone other than Will, who happened to be clinging onto his hand like it was his only tether to life.

"I'm afraid not," the man answered, encouraging Will into the room he stood before with an indication of his head.

With one last fearful glance at Hannibal, he stepped forward into the unknown, just before noticing the disdainful glare the man threw Hannibal, standing helpless as the door shut him out, alone in the corridor. Heart in his throat, Will turned. Before him, there was a long sleek room, reflective walls shining under the bright lights of the ceiling, and a conference table running right down the centre. At the head, sat a woman, her skin a light cocoa and her eyes pinpricks of dark chestnut, regarding him with cool interest. Ringlets of mocha weaved from her head, curling down past her shoulders. Everything about her was a soft brown, a tender glow, stilling his nerves, if only slightly. There was a vague tug in his memory, a faint whisper, but it didn't click until his gaze shifted to her right, seeing exactly who was sat beside her.

Jack.

The full weight of his relief was immense, a thundering storm that exploded in his head and his heart. Jack stood, seemingly involuntarily, but Will didn't have time to check. He was too busy striding across the room and straight into his arms, a cry of shocked joy heaving its way from his chest. He had barely thought of Jack, buried in Verger's mansion, but now he was here it felt as if an age had passed since their last interaction, and that he had felt every last second of it. There was an inexplicable burst of affection for him, a gratitude that he was here.

“What's happening?” he asked as they finally shifted apart, choking back his tears enough to speak. “Where are we? Are you his *wife?*” His eyes had caught on the woman watching them, a tiny smile curving her mouth.

“Bella Crawford,” she finally said, rising from her seat and extending her hand to him. Will took it with bewildered fascination, brain stuck on memories from a lifetime ago.

Everybody had known Bella Crawford. She'd been the darling of District 4, one of the more privileged among them but from humble beginnings, and certainly still in touch with her roots. Everybody had known Bella Crawford and Bella Crawford had known everybody. For once, somebody from the Victors' Village hadn't stayed hidden away up there, tormented by their memories or basking in their new luck. She opposed her reserved and elusive husband, she was a presence to them. A treasured one, at that. Until the illness.

A dark illness, an *old* illness. The Capitol claimed to have eradicated it years ago, but the population of District 4 had watched as she'd deteriorated before their very eyes, weight falling from her body by the day and the dark circles below her eyes deepening like stains, like scars. Verger probably had some medicine somewhere, but they all knew that Jack's pleas were useless. Verger would never waste any antidote on someone so… unimportant. So Bella had died. She had passed in her bed and they had all watched as her body was sent out to sea, off over the horizon and into forever.

“Aren't you *dead?”*

“I was.”

“What does that *mean?* You're *dead*, and so is Chiyoh. Am *I* dead?*”*

“No, you aren't dead. Neither am I and neither is Chiyoh. And it means that cancer doesn't have to be fatal,” she explained, sinking back into her chair and smoothing down her jacket. “Not in the Capitol and not in District Thirteen.”

“District Thirteen was destroyed.”

“District Thirteen is alive and well,” she contradicted. “You're standing in it.”

The shiny walls, the stark colours. They were all creations of a dead District, a lost nation that had been quelled long ago, the Capitol crushing them in the uprising. But… how could they *be* here? How could he be *standing* in it? And why was Mrs Crawford here?

“You think the Capitol wouldn't have faced any threat from its nuclear weapons base? Please. A deal was struck. We were allowed to live here, underground, while they demolished the visible civilisation above us. We seceded on the promise that we don't attack them, and simply live out our days here in peace. I think they're hoping we die out.”

“'We'? Wasn't that seventy five years ago?”

“My ancestors,” she answered serenely. “I was born here. I came to District Four on foot, looking for reinforcements. Instead, I fell in love. It wasn't until I contracted my disease that I

returned. I knew my priorities lay elsewhere. These people… they chose me to rule them."

"We went to your funeral," Will said dumbly, recalling holding Abigail's hand while the waves rocked the small boat out to sea.

"A simple illusion. People die of old age in Thirteen now and then. We usually incinerate their bodies, but what's one to spare?"

"Nobody noticed?"

"They didn't concern themselves with checking. A few friends on the inside did help, I admit. The healers declaring me dead was perhaps one of the most important aspects."

"And Chiyoh?"

"We'd been in contact with her and Hannibal since long before the Games. We snatched her from the arena, after destroying the cameras around her. The Capitol's only choice was to portray it as a death. They wouldn't want to be embarrassed now, would they?"

It was a lot to take in. Jack pulled a chair out just in time as he practically fell back into it, head spinning with new information. District 13 had been here the entire time, and Bella Crawford was not dead. Chiyoh was not dead. *They'd been in contact with Hannibal and Chiyoh*. Hannibal had known, had planned this from the beginning. Will suspected it had not gone to plan.

There was a betrayal that came from it all.

Not that Hannibal had done this- no, that he respected. But not telling him? After everything? Will had thought that at some point during their acquaintance Hannibal may have told him that truth, one that he knew Will would be likely to agree with.

"There is something else we need to tell you," Mrs Crawford admitted with a heavy sigh, and Will looked up in curiosity, wondering what other shocks would be in store for him.

"Your mother is dead."

Chapter 9

Hannibal was waiting outside for him, leaning against the wall opposite the conference room. His gaze had been fixed on the floor, but snapped up as the door swung open and the unnamed man ushered him out. Hannibal's expression shifted from boredom to concern in an instant, seeing Will's blank eyes, the haze he was trudging through.

“What did you do to him?” he bit out, rushing over to Will and taking his face in his hands. “Pazzi, what did you *do*-”

“I didn't *do* anything, Lecter. The President thought it best that we tell him the fate of his mother. Now take him back to his room,” he dismissed, turning back into the room and leaving Will with Hannibal, staring up at him in dazed confusion.

“Will,” Hannibal whispered, thumbs rubbing circles into the high jut of his cheekbones. “Are you okay?”

“My mom.”

“I know,” Hannibal affirmed. “I'm sorry.”

Numbness had begun spreading from his fingers the second he'd heard the news, and it was now securing its iron grip around his heart, so tight he feared it would stop beating. Stumbling back from Hannibal's kind hands, the world tipped below him. His heart went numb, and then his lungs. The heavy grief was suffocating him, choking the air from his throat, and he gasped in oxygen while he still could, his sight blurring even further and mind going dizzy. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see.

Falling to the floor, he barely felt the impact of his knees hitting the hard ground, a scream tearing from his throat, an agonising, helpless wail that tapered off into a whimper, as he trembled on the floor like an infant. His hands pressed into the ground, hands scrabbling into fists, long, uncut fingernails scraping against its shiny varnish. Hannibal's arms were twisting around him, comforting him, but it meant nothing. He felt like a child, and he wanted his *mom*.

“My *mom*,” he howled, leaning back into Hannibal's embrace, desperate for support.

“I know,” Hannibal repeated, and used his clutch on Will to haul his limp body upright, steadying him and dragging him to his feet. His stomach lurched at the sudden shift of position, but his sobbing didn't cease. He let Hannibal lead him through a maze of corridors that he hadn't bothered to remember on the trip down here, shaking as they approached his room. It was in a cordoned off area of the dormitories, an area specifically for medical patients, Hannibal had explained earlier.

The weeping didn't seem to have an end. He cried and cried until there was nothing left, until the sobs held no tears inside them, and it was simply dry heaving. When they finally reached his room, Hannibal hurried him into the adjoining bathroom, guiding him to the sink just in

time, as his retching turned to vomit. Hannibal's hand was a soft weight on the small of his back, resting there as he threw up his misery.

“My mom, she was my *mom*,” he keened, and Hannibal kissed the back of his neck. It was scarcely a press of his lips, nothing but a soothe to the wreckage of his emotions. Mourning was burrowing inside him like a toxic parasite, shelling him out like charred remains, the burnt nothingness of the bereaved.

“I know,” Hannibal said, “I know.”

Will slid to the floor again, not bothering to wipe the vomit from his mouth or snot from his nose. Hannibal was there, sitting beside him with a tissue in hand, dabbing at his face in a near-motherly fashion. All it did was send a pang of loss reverberating through him, squirming away from Hannibal's gentle ministrations. His mother used to treat him like this, softly protective, her radiant care a constant in his life that he had so often taken for granted. How significant had she really been in his experiences, in recent years? Not at all. He had forgotten about her, pushed her aside like he didn't need her. Like he would never have to worry about losing her.

“She never cried after my dad died,” he muttered. “She never showed weakness. But she still kept a box of his things hidden underneath her bed, and every so often I'd catch her going through them. I think those were the only times she ever let herself really feel it.”

“She'd be proud of you.”

“She'd be disgusted.” He snatched the tissue from Hannibal's hand and rubbed viciously at his face, smearing away the sorrow, leaving irritated skin behind, raw from his anguish. “Look at me. I'm a monster. I'm a mess.”

“You just endured five months of torture.”

“Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe Verger should have just-”

“Don't finish that sentence,” Hannibal snapped, a burst of fury rising to the surface of his voice, his gaze flipping from tender pity to steely warning in a split second. “I fought for you. I looked for you. I longed for you, Will. Don't reduce my efforts to nothing.”

There was nothing he could do but look away guiltily. He was grateful he was free of that place, but right now everything seemed hopeless. His mother was dead, swept away by Death to force Will to a fate that he'd always been heading towards: the life of an orphan. Verger had wanted him alone, after all. Wanted him stripped bare from any protection or any family that remained in his life. And here he was, both of his parents now gone, hidden deep beneath the ground once more. Would he ever truly be free?

What really was freedom, when it came down to it all? Did it even exist anymore?

“What happened to her?” he asked. “They told me, but I… I didn't hear. I wasn't really listening.”

“The Capitol told the Peacekeepers to… murder our families. Immediately after we fell. From what I understand, they succeeded, and there was only one survivor: Abigail.”

Relief swirled through him at the words, followed fast by reproach at his ability to feel anything remotely positive during his current circumstances. But Abigail being alive was… something of a reassurance. Perhaps the closest he could possibly hope to get, currently, considering how lost he was. Considering the permanent clench of his heart, the internal bleeding wounds of loss that littered his body.

“She's here?”

“In the compartment next to mine,” Hannibal explained. “For sleeping, that is. She's probably in the cafeteria at the moment.”

“Has she been here?”

“To *see* you?” he questioned, almost incredulous at Will's query. “Of *course* she has. She's barely left since you got here. I only just managed to convince her to go and eat a proper meal.”

“And you?”

“I… may have not had a proper meal either,” he admitted, and Will raised an eyebrow. How unlike Hannibal, to not prioritise his love for the culinary arts.

“For how long?”

“Nearly a week now. You've been unconscious a long time.”

Sighing, he dropped the tissue and reached across for Hannibal's hand, clasping it in his own. His heart felt sore, it felt raw. His mother was dead but his sister was alive. Beverly was alive, somewhere. He'd suffered months of agony but he was still here, still breathing. There was still something to live for, although it didn't quite feel like it at the moment.

“You said the Peacekeepers succeeded? … Your family?”

“Dead. What was left of them, anyway. My parents died a long time ago- but you knew that.”

“I'm sorry,” he whispered, and Hannibal shook his head, sweeping his thumb over the back of Will's hand.

“It's alright. I've done my mourning. Yours is still fresh.” Hannibal's spare hand roamed from his side, trailing up to brush Will's cheek, and Will could feel the pads of his fingers and edges of his fingernails on the tender of his skin like tiny butterflies. “You still have Abigail, and you still have Beverly. You still have me. And we'll be here for all of it. You aren't alone.”

“Thank you,” he breathed, and leaned forward to push a sweet kiss against Hannibal's jaw, ducking his head into the curve between his neck and shoulder, exhausted. “Are we ever really done mourning?”

“Perhaps not,” Hannibal answered, voice drifting into the space above him. “I still think of Mischa often. Abigail reminds me of her, you know.”

“She does?”

“She tries to be strong. Unfeeling, even. But there's a purity behind her eyes that can't be masked. She's unsullied by this cruel world. Mischa was, before she died.”

“Abigail won't be unsullied for much longer. How can she stay pure in the middle of a rebellion?”

“We'll protect her.”

We. Will was a *we* now, and he was free. Well, as free as possible in a society like Panem. Maybe one day, if they prevailed, they'd be free to all extents. Limitlessly. Living lives with boundaries nothing like those of Panem's, a paradise that seemed so impossible to achieve he'd only seen it in his dreams. Because to get there, they would need to win. They would need to beat Verger and the entirety of the Capitol before the Districts could be liberated.

Was that truly impossible? If Will remembered correctly, the rebels had breached Verger's mansion. If his memory served him right, *they had been given the chance to kill Verger*.

“You killed him. You didn't,” he mumbled, pulling back from Hannibal's warmth to frown at him. “Or did you? Didn't you kill him? You snapped his neck, but you said… If you didn't, why aren't Thirteen angry?”

“They agree that it was the right choice,” Hannibal replied, only increasing Will's confusion. “I snapped his neck, but it will only paralyse. When we kill him, it will be… longer, certainly. More painful. I didn't kill him because he deserves worse, and because the enemy is not Verger specifically. It's the Capitol. Killing only him would not have saved us.”

“There are *innocents* in the Capitol! *Children*-”

“Not the *citizens* of the Capitol,” Hannibal corrected. “The *state*. The people that serve by Verger's side. Murdering him would start a war, one of proportions we are not yet ready for. The rebel force sent into the mansion were enough for a rescue, and nothing more. Not enough to take on the forces of the entire Capitol army. With Verger paralysed, still alive, they can't make any decisions. Not without his authority, and I suspect he's undergoing some serious medical attention at the moment. It buys us time.”

“How did you get in there? The mansion?”

“There's a network of underground tunnels. They've likely been discovered by now, so they were only a one-time use. We'll have to go overground when we mount our final attack.”

“Do you think...” Throat dry, Will swallowed, glancing away from Hannibal's face. There was something war-torn and intense in his eyes, like he'd grown used to speaking about this. He probably had, the same way Will had grown used to the lashings and injections and constant, consistent pain. “Will that be soon?”

“No,” Hannibal answered, going all soft again, putting Will's nerves at ease. “It's nothing to worry about right now. It'll be a while.”

“I wish he was dead,” he admitted, loathing infecting his tone. He'd tormented Will for the better part of two years, and most especially in the last few months. And now, he'd killed his mother. “Does that make me a monster?”

“If you are a monster, then it isn't because of that,” Hannibal responded. “That… anybody could understand.”

“You'd know all about being a monster.”

If he wasn't mistaken, there was a smirk curving Hannibal's mouth. It was hard to see in the dark of the bathroom, with the cold tiles chilling him and the acidic smell of vomit invading his nostrils. There was something disgusting about it, something primitive, but Will didn't care. They'd found one another in savagery, had fallen in love surrounded by disgust and dirt and pain.

“I am a monster,” he agreed, “and I'm yours.”

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Tears fell as darkness deepened. Hannibal had been shooed out by an irritated doctor, who took one look at Will's pasty face and offered him morphling for the pain. Pain that he hadn't even noticed, but was fairly extreme. After the doctor left, allowing a small light remaining beside his bed at his insistence that he couldn't imagine sleeping without a substitute for Verger's candles, he finally undressed. The boy who stared back at him in the mirror was not one he recognised. Not so long ago, his body had been nothing but expanses of pale skin, marred only by fading scars and the occasional unwanted freckle. Abigail was always the one with freckles, really. His mother had loved them, called them human constellations, and when Abigail was especially young, falling asleep in her lap, his mom had traced them on her skin.

A sob worked its way from his throat as he traced the jut of his ribs, visible from malnourishment, and remembered the guilty look on his mother's face if they ever had to go without dinner. It would hurt more than the actual hunger, seeing the struggle she had to go through to simply keep them afloat without his fathers income. If she saw him now, bones stark under his skin, severely underfed, she'd be horrified. Blame herself, probably, for not having found a way to keep him healthy and alive. It must've been torture, watching him in the Games.

He'd endured his own torture. The marks were clear; they were there, and they were undeniable, stretching across his legs and arms and torso, angry welts. Barely a patch of skin was left uncovered, and even when he turned around he saw nothing but destruction, written across his back like a signature. Like a brand. One that Verger had never gotten the chance to seal upon his skin. But poor Margot… she'd carry it forever, pressed upon her, the reminders of her trauma only hidden beneath her clothes, always a hairsbreadth away. They'd both come away with damage, but Will was sure he couldn't imagine the extent of hers.

The light was dim, but it was enough. He could see the raised ridges of developing scars and the red depth of fresher injuries. He could see the black and blue of bruises, smudged across him, the dark of night spread along the lines of a human. He could see the smallness of himself, both through the loss of weight and the lack of dignity. It was disturbing enough to persuade him to pull his pants back on, loose and drawstring around the vulnerable wounds wrapping his waist like a belt. This wasn't the same person who had entered the arena for the second time, and it was a far cry from the person who'd entered it the first time. That old him was unrecognisable, now. Nothing but a memory, a stone skipping the surface of the waves. It would sink, eventually. As would everything else he knew.

All things would come to an end, one day.

“Will?”

It was a voice he knew, accompanied by a soft knock, but it wasn't masculine enough to belong to Hannibal, as much as he wished it did. It was a shame he'd been sent away, since now they had all the time in the world to be together. No painful distance. No constant fighting for their lives. Just ordinary schedules on ordinary days, an endless sea of time, that Will wanted to spend every last second of which sheltered in Hannibal's embrace.

But then, Hannibal wasn't the only person he'd missed.

Behind him, stood two figures. One taller, one short, but both with long, sweeping hair that fell past their shoulders like a shining waterfall. One had eyes of obsidian, and the other of sapphire. He knew them in an instant, heart leaping in his chest. His reasons to survive, here to save him.

“Bev,” he said, breath hushing his voice, quiet as a gentle breeze in the dim, silent room. “Abigail.”

Goodbyes were hard, but he supposed they made the reunion even better. He had no home to speak of, not anymore. District 4 was a long way away and he was unable to return, but perhaps he didn't need to. He would miss the sky and the sea and the buzz of his people, but apart from his mother, he had everything he needed right here. When they came to him, and he took them in his arms, it was home enough for him.

Chapter 10

“The definition of freedom is 'the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants',” Abel Gideon read from the thick-bound book he was holding, putting it down to finish declaring his point. “Would you not agree that not being allowed to attack the Capitol is an infringement upon our right to act as we want? And that as a result, District Thirteen is not really free?”

“No,” Will said shortly, twisting his food around his fork. “Some freedoms have to be given up for the greater good. If you want real change, don't go charging into the Capitol alone like a maniac. You really think President Crawford isn't allowing us just so she can restrict our freedoms?”

“Perhaps,” Gideon answered. “How are we supposed to know?”

“She's leading a rebellion. It doesn't take a lot to see her aims.”

“*Katz* is leading the rebellion,” he argued, and Will rolled his eyes, abstaining from replying. Arguing with Abel Gideon was a losing battle. No matter what was said, his opinion opposed it. And he wasn't the only one- so many of them here in Thirteen had so much to say about what should be done and how. But President Crawford encouraged it, had told Will that it encouraged democracy, when he asked, and he supposed she had a point.

Settling into life in Thirteen had been easier than he'd originally thought. At first, he'd assumed his months of torture and subsequent rescue was all the small community would be talking about, but his expectations couldn't have been more wrong. Once he was released from the medical wing, he found that the community wasn't small at all. There were thousands upon thousands of residents that filed into compartments every night, stacked together under the ruins of their ancestors' homes. His rescue had filtered from topical conversation after a few days, and then they were onto something else. What Gideon said about a lack of freedom was wrong; Will was freer than he'd ever been. Yes, they were forced to stay underground most of the time, and yes, they had to follow some sort of law. But it was a far cry from the regime they'd lived under the Capitol, forced to give up two children every year to their insatiable appetite for control.

But then, people like Gideon just didn't understand. He'd grown up here, and he didn't know any different- his only real understanding of the Capitol was through whispered rumours and clips of the propaganda Thirteen had gotten hold of. So many of them here had no idea what it was like, living like that. But there were a few, thankfully, that had fled from their Districts to the possibility of a District Thirteen and got lucky. Will was glad someone like Commander Pazzi who'd run from District 12 was leading the army, someone with an understanding of the Capitol's arsenal, rather than a man like his deputy Sogliato, who'd been raised here. How would he ever understand what was necessary and what was not? Trigger happy Commanders never won their wars.

“I'm doing what?” Bev cut in from behind them, balancing her tray in one hand as she climbed onto the bench beside Will.

“Leading the rebellion,” Gideon responded, matter-of-fact. “Its your leadership that's giving the rebellion momentum.”

“Momentum is nothing without an ideology to move in the first place,” she contradicted, and Gideon simply blinked at her, at a loss for words. She was one of the only ones who could match his mounting disagreements and win. “Don't discredit what President Crawford has done for us.”

“Well, her parents did more,” he sneered, finding his voice. “But you wouldn't know that. You weren't here when they were in office. You hadn't even been *born* yet.”

“Clearly they *didn't*,” she snapped, “or we wouldn't still be here, trapped beneath the ground. We breached Verger's mansion not *three weeks ago*. We're closer now to prevailing than ever before, so maybe look at the facts next time, before criticizing the President with empty arguments.”

“You believe in a society where the powerful are never questioned?”

“I believe in a society where the achievements of our leaders are *recognised,* especially when those leaders are just and fair. You forget, Abel, we've lived in Verger's Panem. You haven't.”

“Pulling out the tribute card? Mature.”

“No more mature than you pulling out the age card.”

“Can we *please* not discuss politics while I'm trying to eat my lunch,” Will finally interrupted, sighing as he did. All the conversations about the rebellion and when to strike the Capitol made his head hurt, and it was bad enough that they seemed to happen all day long. The least he could ask for was to eat in peace.

Muttered apologies came in response, and for a while the only sound was voices in the background and the clink of cutlery. The dining hall was, surprisingly, one of his favourite areas of Thirteen. Some days, he'd sit on the railings by the door and simply watch as people sat and ate and talked, as life went on down here, free from Verger's tyranny. Beverly called it obsessive, and Hannibal called it curious. Hannibal was slightly biased, but Will still preferred to think of it as the latter. It was a curious thing, the lives of the liberated, and he liked to watch them thrive.

There were the ones he didn't know, and those were the most interesting.

A group of boys no older than ten, usually pretending to be soldiers and playing with faux guns. A mother and her two teenage daughters, not that much younger than Will. An elderly couple that always held hands. A middle aged woman with a limp who seemed to be in love with one of the chefs, a pretty girl with all her hair shaved off.

And then there were those he did know.

Chilton, looking severely regretful about having joined the rebellion. Freddie, copper curls pulled back from her face, softer and more serene than he'd ever seen her. Peter, timid and trembling but *happy*, at peace. Bev and Georgia, their long hair contrasting colours, entwined hands brightening the room more than a splash of paint ever could. Hannibal, tawny hair loose over his forehead, his warmth as close to Will as possible. And of course, Abigail, her smile like the rising sun.

It was survival. It was humanity.

“Lunch looks good today,” came another voice, and Alana approached their table, taking a seat next to Gideon. She was another person who could manage to shut him up, by some miracle.

“Yeah,” Will agreed absentmindedly, and from the sad pity on her face as she saw his expression, she knew where he was about to take the conversation. “Is Margot-”

“She's healing,” Alana answered, swallowing and glancing away. “Like last time you asked.”

“Did you tell her I wanted to see her?”

“Yes, and she wants to see you. But if the doctors decide she shouldn't be overwhelmed-”

“Then the doctors are wrong,” he snapped, biting his tongue the second the words left his lips. Sighing, he dropped his fork, resting his elbows on the table and bowing his head in shame. “Sorry. I'm just… she was all I had.”

“I know,” Alana whispered. “And you were all she had. Which is why the doctors think it could end badly- its a reminder, you see.”

Reminders could be bad, he supposed. But it wasn't as if he didn't come across reminders everywhere he went: the bare walls of District Thirteen, the earthy smell its corridors held, the fluorescent lights that lit his way. Margot wasn't exactly a negative reminder. She was an anchor, a companion, the only familiarity he'd had in that unforgiving place. It couldn't be helped, considering all of Thirteen was built like this, but for the doctors to presume what was right for him when they didn't really have a clue what he'd suffered upset him. They had asked, of course, but he'd refused to talk. To say it out loud made it all too real, and not only that, but it *hurt*. Couldn't they look at his wounds and deduce what physical damage had been inflicted upon him? What good did hearing about how the experience traumatised him do?

“They only want to make you better,” Hannibal had said, counting the lines on Will's palm and running his fingernails along them, dim in the lamplight of the nocturne.

“I don't want to talk about it. Not to strangers.”

“Talk about it to me?”

Will had shaken his head.

Hannibal had suggested Bedelia, who was trained in that sort of thing specifically. Will had promised to consider it, but knew it would be a while before he got to any sort of mental state

where he was comfortable delving into the damage Verger had caused him. That only happened in his dreams, and even then, it was unwilling. He didn't exactly *want* to wake up screaming, drenched in sweat, phantom agony dancing across his skin, with Verger's name on his lips, yet it kept occurring. Hannibal stopped asking after a while, understanding not to push. Now, he'd only kiss Will's cheek, his forehead, his lips, wipe the sweat from his forehead and let him cry into his chest. He never asked to see the scars, but Will knew he wanted to. He wanted to see how Verger had marked him, how possessive he would need to be when they next crossed paths with the President, likely when all of this came to an end, whether it be for better or for worse.

Either way, Will knew he had a protector in the form of Hannibal. Knew it from the fierce affection in his eyes when their gazes caught, the steadfast nature of his kisses, the frequent declarations of love. It was all he had wanted, not so long ago. Now it was here, all he wanted was a life that hadn't turned out so unfairly.

One day, perhaps, when Panem was free and so were they, he would take Hannibal back to District 4. He'd lead him to the emptiness of his old cabin, peel back the covers of his bed, and crawl under there, into the comfort of his younger, more innocent days. They could replicate what he used to do with Abigail when she first moved in; use their knees to lift the blanket and hold a flashlight in between them, making shadows with their nimble, childish hands. It would be different, now, especially with Hannibal. More cramped, that was for sure. But it could still contain the golden, silken glow of contentment, the delicate intimacy that he would only ever have with those he loved. Will could show him the market, where stalls of driftwood panels and seaweed decoration had always stood. He could take Hannibal down to the river, follow it all the way to the ocean, pull him out into the enveloping waves and drag him under. The moonlight would illuminate their tender connection just like before, and the current would send them out to sea.

Send them out to sea with the salt and the seashells and the rotting corpse of Garret Jacob Hobbs.

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Hannibal had always looked beautiful when he fought.

There was something so hauntingly elegant and graceful about the way he dodged his opponents' blows, effortlessly navigating the space around, a seamless dance that seemed to come as a second nature. They weren't the only ones in combat- couples and trios sparred throughout the room, but Hannibal, of course, stood out. A few soldiers had even paused to watch him, matching his rival hit for hit. Will watched too, standing on the balcony overlooking the training area, face practically pressed against the glass as he eagerly drank down Hannibal's movements.

“I've never seen anyone his age fight so well,” Miriam observed, eyes also fixed on him from where she lounged at her desk. Will knew she wished she could be down there training, but she was the same age as him, and therefore not old enough; in Thirteen, soldiers began training at eighteen. A fair rule, Will thought. As a compromise, she was allowed to manage the scheduling of the training room, keeping a logbook of all who entered, but it was all she

could do while she waited to come of age. She spent most of her time hungrily peering down at her elders, cataloguing their movements in that bright, earnest brain of hers.

“He's been training all his life.” At her wistful sigh, he grit his teeth, turning to see her gazing longingly into the crowd of fighters. His heart lodged itself in his throat, rising as his rage did, hot and urgent as his blood rushed to his brain. “Don't. You're lucky you get to wait.”

Shame registered on her face as she realised exactly who she was talking to, and she winced, glancing away from the glass, guilt written in her expression like a novel for him to pour over.

“Sorry,” she muttered, tapping her pen against the desk absentmindedly. She couldn't seem to help herself with remarks like that, and it wasn't as if he couldn't *sympathise*. She'd grown up being told that to fight was her purpose, but made to postpone that. She felt as if she had something to prove, and he understood that, to an extent.

But it hurt. He'd give anything to have her life, to be raised in moderate freedom, not pushed towards the waiting jaws of death every year of his teenage life.

Instead of dwelling on a past and a reality he could not change, he dragged his attention back to Hannibal, who oddly, had stopped moving and was balanced behind his opponent, shifting their arm and positioning it to block attacks. Will tilted his head, unable to hear the words being exchanged but squinting his eyes at the other person, small and slender with long, dark hair tied up, swinging when she moved.

“Who is that?” he asked Miriam, who frowned at him in response, and he nodded in the direction of Hannibal's sparring partner. “Who's with him?”

“Oh,” she said, a suspicious hesitance seeping into her voice as she shifted in her chair, eyes fixed on the pair below. “I don't know.”

Something in Will froze, alerting him to some intangible reason to panic. Drawing his eyes away from the training below them, he slowly approached where Miriam was now sitting straight in her chair, eyes wide as his hands went to the logbook, scanning the names. It was all unintelligible scrawl besides Hannibal's signature, the only name he recognised. Everybody in there at the moment was an unknown to him, yet there had been a familiarity with the way Hannibal was teaching her to fight that indicated that Will might, in fact, be aware of their identity.

“Miriam...”

“You won't find her in there,” she finally sighed. “I know she's too young, but what's the harm? I let her in. A little practice won't-”

“Who is '*she*'?”

A pause hung in the air, a vibrating moment twitching between them. Miriam swallowed.

“Abigail.”

The chord of discontent inside him snapped, a wire cut and left to spring back. His body caught up with his mind in seconds, blocking out Miriam's pleading apologies as he darted to the door leading down to the training room, flying down the stairs and into the wide, open space he'd only ever seen from the balcony. Hannibal and Abigail were in the centre, so caught up that they were unaware of the door banging open. It was only when his hand closed around Abigail's arm, jerking her away from Hannibal and behind his body that they noticed him, Abigail gasping in surprise and Hannibal stopping in his tracks, eyeing him dubiously.

Everybody in the room had noticed. He could feel it in the air, the sudden shift in attention, the quiet lack of sound. He was about to make a scene, but the anger boiling in him was so hot that he didn't *care*- he'd suffered torture, battle, *death*, nearly. A little embarrassment was nothing he couldn't handle. All the fury and protective rage was building up inside him, a mounting volcano of brotherly possessiveness, but Hannibal's face was expectant. Waiting for an outburst that Will would inevitably regret, scramble to retract as soon as his head cleared.

There was a sparring stick that had fallen from Abigail's hand lying on the floor, having rolled to Will's feet. It was circular and worn, and it was nothing that Will wanted to lay his hands on. But he would, if he had to.

So he didn't shout.

Hannibal wouldn't expect a blow to the head now, would he?

Chapter 11

If Will hadn't been moved into a compartment with Abigail and Beverly the week before, he would've been there in the hospital wing to see Hannibal get stitched up whether the doctors liked it or not. But they thought it best they be kept apart anyway, seeing as Will's 'understandable violent tendencies' had exercised themselves upon Hannibal. Of course, it hadn't been to *hurt*, and it *hadn't* hurt, Will knew. It had been to shock, and he *had* been shocked. The betrayal and pain in his eyes hadn't come from anything physical, only from love's keen sting, the ache of heartbreak. Will hadn't stayed to see more, and had stormed out before medics could arrive, pulling Abigail by the arm as he marched to their compartment.

“What *happened* to you?” she shouted, one of her many protests as his fingers dug into her forearm. “What happened to my brother?”

“He died in the arena,” he spat. “That very first one.”

As soon as the door to the compartment banged shut she forced herself free of him, stumbling away with a horrified expression curling her face, disgust shaping her movements. She was rubbing her arm, where four red impressions curved clear around her arm, fingerprints burnt onto her skin. Guilt washed over him, but it was still overpowered by the indignation seeping throughout his body. Teaching her… it was the ultimate betrayal. And by *Hannibal*, of all people. She was so lovely and peaceful. She was so small. And war was so big, so hard and violent, and it was something she didn't deserve. Something none of them deserved, really.

But Abigail the least.

If she could fight, it was an end. It was finality, it was an inescapable fate, the worst thing he could imagine. Letting her fight would be unwise. She was so young, only *thirteen*- or was it fourteen now?- and Thirteen's policy on under 18s fighting seemed perfectly reasonable to him; children should not be soldiers. Children and soldiers were a juxtaposition, an impossible sentence, and his Abigail did not deserve that. Hannibal may have thought he was doing what was right, but *he didn't get to decide*. *He* wasn't her brother. *Will* was, and he didn't want her to be exposed to this sort of brutality so young, not if he had any say in it.

“I can make my own choices,” she whispered, horror and offence infecting her tone. “You don't control me, Will. I want to *learn* to fight, at least. It's not a *bad* thi-”

“You don't understand,” he replied, low and angry. “You'll never understand. Not the way I do. I can't let you do this, I can't let you *be* this. You're better. You're so much better.”

“You don't get to decide that.”

“I'm your brother.”

“But you *aren't*!”

She fell quiet, breathing fast, surprised at the words that had left her mouth, eyes open wide and focused on him. Shocked hurt rang through him, clear and coursing through his veins, foggy alcohol, bitter medicine. The statement wasn't exactly incorrect, but that didn't mean it didn't hit him right in the gut. They'd come clean to her about her true heritage, and eventually even told her exactly the events leading up to her merging into their family, but this… this was painful. Will had had a hand in *raising* her, had watched her grow from the tiniest seed into *this*, a beautiful blooming flower, her petals glowing ethereal in the light of the sun, extending up to forever. All he wanted was to protect her. All he wanted was to love her, his sweet little innocent sister.

She wasn't innocent anymore.

And she had never been his sister.

She had never been his at all.

“Abigail,” he forced out, lip nearly trembling from the weight of his remorse. His fury at Hannibal was another subject entirely, one that he didn't need to broach while he stood across from Abigail, his misdirected rage flowing into the room, dripping from his pores and aiming toward her. It wasn't exactly *her* fault- how could he blame her for wanting to protect herself, especially after watching him in the Games for two consecutive years, seeing him dance from danger's grasp only scarcely, its yearning fingers brushing his skin? Danger was a kind stranger, waiting in the wings for him to let his guard down, and sometimes… he didn't fear it. He wanted it. Lived for it, even, let it induce hot adrenaline in him, rising to the surface of his skin like steam. “I'm sorry,” he whispered.

“I deserve my own life, Will,” she said, voice shaking as it swept through the air between them. “I know mom's gone, and I know you miss her. But it doesn't mean you get to take her place.”

The mention of his mother made him stiffen, slight vulnerability shuttering down as soon as the words came out. It certainly wasn't something he'd achieved closure from, the pain still as fresh as a new wound on his heart, the healing hands of time slowly scabbing it over. But no time at all had passed for him. Abigail had been allowed *months* to grieve, where he'd had only weeks. Bringing her up seemed a low blow, but then perhaps he'd been too rough with her. The marks on her arm were quickly fading, but they shouldn't have been put there at *all*, especially not by him.

“It's not you I'm angry with,” he finally said, moving past the loss clogged in his throat to speak with a rasping, emotion-heavy voice. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken it out on you. It's Hannibal I need to talk to.”

She shut her eyes in irritation, exhaling through her nose with a noisy breath, indignation now long gone to be replaced with mild exasperation.

“Will. It was my decision, not his. Please don't be angry at him-”

“Why not? I think it's pretty obvious what I want, and namely what I *don't* want. This… it wasn't his *place*,” he responded, all that righteous wrath coming back full force, a tumultuous

wind that sped through him like thunder. “But it was wrong to blame you- this is between me and Hannibal.”

“I can see nothing I say will change your mind,” she muttered sharply, turning to her bunk and hoisting herself onto it with a sigh, rubbing her eyes as she sat on its edge. “Just don't be too hard on him, okay?”

“No promises.”

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Hannibal lived in the compartment next to his and Abigail's, and the walls were so thin that when Will spent a rare night in his actual compartment rather than curled up next to Hannibal, he could still hear him walking about. Will had memorised it so well that when he listened, he tried to plot it in his head: he knew when Hannibal was sat in the armchair by the heater, reading a book, knew from the sound of shifting pages and the hum of electricity. He knew when Hannibal was drawing, sat at the desk, obvious from the scratch of charcoal on paper and rustle of sheets as the work was looked over. He knew when Hannibal was on his side in bed, arms open and curled around a figure that wasn't there, that had their eyes closed in concentration and their hand pressed up against the wall that separated them, could tell from the silent knowledge and peaceful companionship exuding between them.

And most of all, the click of a lock and opening of a door meant his return. It wasn't even a sentimental recognition, simply a realistic one. The sound of anybody entering a compartment would be unmistakable.

Hannibal didn't come back that night.

For a split, hysterical second, Will wondered if he'd killed him. If he'd swung too hard and hit his temple instead of his jaw, incapacitating him in ways that he would never dream of willingly doing, even in situations like that. But the second was over quicker than it had begun, stopped by the memory of the weak hit, that would likely only leave bruises for a little while, not cause death. Hannibal's hand had flown to his cheek and he'd swivelled up to stare at Will in shock, blood dripping from his open, astonished mouth. He was conscious. He was aware. Which was what Will hadn't wanted- for it to *hurt*.

What had happened with Abigail had been more than a simple mistake, and it was something he would have to severely make up for soon enough. He'd marked her; not *intentionally*, but that didn't excuse it. He'd regretted it the minute they'd escaped to privacy and she had shouted back, realising the extent of his actions and how he had unfairly inflicted his rage upon *her*, when really it was *Hannibal* who he wanted to scream at, wanted to claw at and knock to the ground with nothing but his own fists. Every time he thought about it, it set his blood to boiling again, pulling the air from his lungs and hitting him in the gut as images of Hannibal flashed across his mind, bloody apologies spilling from his lips, bruised vows to never do it again. Will imagined pushing him down again and refusing to accept it, thumbing the beads of red bursting new and urging forward into Hannibal's mouth, feeling the wet tenderness of his tongue and wild bite of his teeth, and forcing him to swallow down the bitter taste of his own blood.

Arousal hung in the air, and Will had never been happier that Abigail was asleep. After all he had been through, it was surprising that he found violence arousing. Even more so that he found violence directed toward *Hannibal* arousing, his saviour, his friend, his lover. His tender, brutal boy. Sometimes, he wished…

What would his mother say?

He'd never tell her about *that*, of course, it was a little *too* personal. But maybe here, in Thirteen, where his main problems concerned arguments and sparring rather than where his next meal was coming from, he could share his petty annoyances. Talk about his relationships, his nightmares, the things that kept him up at night. She'd never asked, before. Only refused to push and waited for him to come to her, which he never had. Which he probably would've, one day.

Maybe here, he would have. Maybe.

Now he would never know.

“They're only jealous,” she'd told him after the hundredth time he'd come home with black eyes and a limp, wiping the blood from his jaw with a damp flannel. He felt it smear across his cheek with a wince. “Don't let it bother you.”

He'd felt sore and battered, but he'd loved her. His dad had died only a year before, but Will remembered how charismatic he'd been; his smiling eyes and laugh lines attracted supporters in the dozens. Abigail had always been well-liked at school, pretty and clever, another of those girls with a future that was clearly bright. But his mother. She had become increasingly distant after the loss of his father, but even before, he never recalled her being popular. There were a few women she was friendly with in the District, but she'd always been reserved, keeping to herself most days. She was the only one he'd felt a kinship to, in those early raw and burning days of grief.

“They aren't jealous,” he'd contradicted, wise beyond his years. “They're unnerved.”

“Will-”

“People fear things that are different. I confuse them. So they hate me.”

She'd sighed, her dabbing at his face pausing as she gazed at him in fond consternation. Her job as his mother couldn't have been easy- he'd always been an odd child, a little too quiet, and when he did speak, a little too loud, too truthful. And now, looking straight through her empty words of comfort at his still young age, seeing them for what they were: a farce, a falsity, a lie parents told their children so they wouldn't realise that they were simply disliked.

“Maybe so,” she finally admitted, the flannel moving over his face again. “But why do they matter? There's nothing wrong with being different.”

“Society sees it as abnormal.”

“Forget society. If you're abnormal, then so am I,” she declared, a grin spreading across her mouth, and he caught her wrist to look into her eyes, see the truth there as it was. “It's you and me, Will.”

He'd always been closer to his father, but she was all he'd had. His mother, his barrier between being loved and being parentless. But they'd bonded through their mourning, through their loss its stinging and inescapable inevitability. She had been his rock, his tether, his grounding presence despite the tumultuous pain of having no father. It was different, now.

Now, he was nothing but an orphan.

Chapter 12

Margot's face was made of blood.

Her screams echoed throughout the walls, rebounding like gunshots in a small room, in a large endlessness. Her fingers were thin and scrawny like a beggar's, curling around the bars that separated their cells with a seeking helplessness, reaching out in desperate need. Often, he would hold them, his hands gripping the bars in turn, interlinking their fingers. Nearer the end, they were less like fingers and more like bones. Two skeletons sitting opposite one another, clinging together, the only thing they had left of anything. Their only possessions: bruises, blood, and each other.

Candlelight illuminated her, and her face was blood and flesh and bone, gaunt and thin. Shadows danced on her cheeks, whispered stories around a campfire, the hue of imminent death. She was wasting away in front of him, shrinking into her ragged clothes, and he was sure he looked the same. If he brushed a hands across his ribs, he could feel them clearer than he'd ever been able to, knew they'd be visible through his skin if he worked up the courage to glance down. His throat ached for water, his eyes filled with it. His face swelled with the blues and purples of pain, blooming like flowers in the spring, blossoms scattered along his jaw, blood confetti. It dripped from his head like scarlet sweat, and he wished for nothing more than to be free. And for a lesser hope: something from home. A grain of sand, a bluebell, a stag.

The Stag was nowhere to be seen. It was a phantom, only heard in the distant drumbeat of hooves, carried by the wind like the Wild Hunt, far away from here. For perhaps the first time, he wanted it. It had only been a side effect before, at first he had felt fear and then only indifference. But now, want. Longing to feel the soft shine of its flank under his hands, hear its heaving breaths flutter against the back of his neck, a comforting breeze. Anything was better than this, and now it was gone he finally realised how much he missed it. It was the longing that made him realise, in all honesty. He knew what the Stag was.

Or more accurately, *who* the Stag was.

The Stag was glances across crowded rooms and surprisingly soft hands and stardust dripping from adoring eyes. It was sweat and dirt and blood. Rain, petrichor, hot kisses. Safety, eternity.

It was exactly what he wanted, just what he needed, his hope and his anchor, something to carry him through the horror of his new home in Verger's cells, in the depths of his sick and twisted consciousness.

The Mansion. The *Prison*.

The arena, in a way. He was still fighting for survival everyday.

Margot opened her mouth to shout, to yell, and there was only darkness. It swallowed the candles and the sun and the stars, and when Will squeezed his eyes shut, he couldn't find light

either. Only the black finality of death, rich and waiting, emblazoned upon the inside of his eyelids. Through his closed eyes, he couldn't see the smoke rising in the distance, the cloud of dust and invisible mystery, of misery, but he could feel it. An oncoming storm, slowly growing louder, rumbling thunder. It sounded like salvation, like that fateful day he had been rescued, held like he was the most important thing in the world and whisked away towards his old life, a life he no longer knew.

Cries shook his form, and he quivered where he sat, fear forcing his eyes open to witness the thunder unfurling before him. Faint hope tripped in his chest, but was overpowered by the despair that had weighed him down since he'd first heard his sister's name called, that fateful day of the reaping. Smoke had swirled in him then, uncertainty shooting through his veins, a high of adrenaline. It hadn't cleared since, had only grown, blinding him, choking him, clouding his air supply. It was here now, a spectator turned attacker.

And through the smoke was Chiyoh, her hair a waterfall of midnight and her eyes stars twinkling in the darkness, and emerging behind her: him.

Flames licked around them, the Dragon roared, and Will awoke.

***

“Do you still dream about them?” Hannibal asked.

“About who?”

“Our victims.”

“We were all victims in the arena.”

“All of us?”

Will sighed, head drooping against Hannibal's shoulder. He'd returned in the night, as Will finally drifted into sleep, his dreams restless and filled with torment. As usual, Hannibal had been waiting for him, a fresh bruise mottling his face and forgiveness shining in his open arms. Will had gone to him immediately, but without apology. They were both at fault here, really.

“Of course I dream about them,” he whispered. “I barely remember the last time I didn't.”

“I dream about you,” Hannibal replied, murmured into Will's hair. “Or at least, I did. For a long time… I worried I'd never get you back.”

“I know. But you did. I'm here, Hannibal, and I'm not going anywhere.”

“Not physically, maybe,” he muttered, and Will felt him shift away in discomfort. “I can't lose you, Will. Not again. Not ever. I'm sorry about Abigail-”

“Don't,” Will cut in, tone sharp, biting. “I'm trying not to be angry. I overreacted, I admit it, but that doesn't mean I'm happy about it. I think it's best we just… don't mention it.”

“You and I both know that's not true.”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“I know,” Hannibal said. “But I also know that we have to.”

Every time he thought about it, the betrayal resurfaced like a sickness. It tasted like a toxic poison, resting at the back of his throat, filling his mouth with some unknown, souring taste whenever he swallowed. The idea that they had to speak about it… he resented it, but what he resented more was that Hannibal was most likely correct. When he'd fallen back into Hannibal's arms, a second nature by now, he hadn't wanted to talk. His brain was still racing with atrocities and his body was mindlessly seeking the warmth of another's arms wrapped around him, not bothering to fix back on issues that seemed less important now that darkness had fallen and that day had disappeared into soft snores and quiet corridors. He'd only wanted to lay here, still, as they so often did, and bask in their steadfast, patient love.

“There isn't much to say.” His tone was certainly less pointed, but no less firm. “You aren't to do that again.”

“It's her life, Will.”

“And she can live it how she wants. *Here*. Abiding by their rules: no fighting until she turns eighteen.”

“That isn't what this is about.”

“No, it's *not*,” he snapped, sitting ramrod straight in the bed, arching away from Hannibal's embrace in seconds. His arms curled around himself, and he felt Hannibal's presence him move, urging closer but not touching. It hovered just behind him, a heavy silhouette, buzzing with tension. “What we went through… I can't have that for her. I can't. Not now my mom's-”

His voice died out, cracking with insurmountable loss. Hannibal's presence finally pressed up against his back, a hand coming to rest on his shoulder blade, rubbing small circles of comfort into his bones, his flesh. Lips pressed against the nape of his neck, fingertips dancing along the curve of his collarbone, a sigh brushing against his spine, it all calmed him. His heart was surging with pain, a pain that he had not quite addressed, that he probably never would. How would he ever reach acceptance over his mother's fate? How would he ever be *okay*?

“It isn't the same.”

“It's close enough.”

“You aren't her mother, Will,” Hannibal said. “However much you try to be, you're no replacement. And you *shouldn't* be.”

It struck him in the gut, punching the air from his lungs and dragging tears of salt to his eyes, which he closed in response to the pinpricks of spilling pain. His mouth was dry as he leant back into Hannibal with a trembling exhale, feeling arms close around him with a softness he

always expected but always took his breath away. Hannibal's nose trailed along his jaw, quickly followed by his warm breath, a long, sweet kiss. The physicality of their love never failed to move Will, burrowing itself into his insides, settling in the breadth of his heart.

“I can't let her become that.”

“It isn't your decision to make.”

“It isn't yours, either,” he breathed, opening his eyes, and watched Hannibal's expression morph to remorse above his eyes.

“I'm sorry,” was his reply, and Will reached up to push his hair from his face, feeling the smooth silk slip between his fingers. For a killer, for a warrior, the details of his making were so intricate, so intimate. Like a newborn baby. “You're right, I overstepped. Just… don't hit me next time?”

Surprising a smile from him was an eventuality when Hannibal talked to him, but Will hadn't quite expected it so soon, especially after the mood he'd been in earlier. But this was who Hannibal was, it was *how* he was: the great love of Will's life. Home, comfort, forever. Laughter and joy, the good parts of life, the parts that Will went so often without he sometimes thought they were gone for good. Then Hannibal, with his crooked smile, silken laugh, his raucous, wanting gaze. Nothing was gone for good. Not with Hannibal around.

“I promise not to hit you again,” Will assured, soft, like gentle notes played on a piano, the slow strumming of strings, the tide rushing up the sand. “Promise not to teach Abigail anything I wouldn't want you to?”

“I promise,” Hannibal was saying, and then their lips were pressed against one another, shifting in tandem as they had so many times before. Tenderness seemed to grow with every kiss they shared, traversing between them like dust on the wind, and Will wanted to say he missed the bloody passion of the arena, but he didn't. Not right now. He surely would, the minute he returned to the battlefield, grasping the outstretched arm of savagery, but for the first time in a while, he was at peace. He wanted to keep that prolonged for as much time as possible, to simply *rest*, even if only for a few weeks.

Hannibal sighed into his mouth, palm curving to fit along Will's cheek, and everything was in place. For some reason, it appeared Hannibal knew, or had assumed, exactly what Will needed from him, and never pushed for anything more. These were their first weeks of privacy after that kiss in the arena, that *first*, and Will had expected Hannibal to bring up the prospect of intimacy, at least. Perhaps even ask. But it was only diligent respect that came, a sweet sense of duty that Will pledged to himself not to take advantage of, but enjoyed nonetheless. Hannibal must have known, really:

Maybe one day.

When Will's scars, both physical and psychological, were less obvious, and when the war was over. When Verger was dead and buried, then they would start their life together, let bare skin touch and desire reign. When the society they lived in presented nothing but safety, rather than constant terror and impending doom.

“You truly are the most beautiful creature,” Hannibal uttered, pupils blown wide, expanding in his black, dark eyes. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“Something terrible, I bet.”

“I've done terrible things all my life. You are my biggest exception.”

Will grinned, and so did Hannibal, teeth bared, wild animals in the dark. There was something raw and honest about all the nights they'd spent lying next to each other, hidden from the harsh and cloaked lies of the day. He never felt as close to Hannibal as he did in moments like these, shared secrets spilled like stars into the welcoming night. They fell into the silence like prayers, slick and hoping, answered. They were each other's Gods.

“You've saved me. Much more than I can count.”

“The only good I've ever inflicted, I'm afraid.”

“I'm no angel either,” he remarked, and Hannibal's smile didn't falter.

“Aren't you?” he asked, rapturous, struck. His fingers rolled one of Will's curls between them, watching the way it sprung back when pulled, infused with new life. He remembered not so long ago, cornered in that cell, the way his hair hung unwashed and greasy, devoid of any volume. The only water he'd received was the occasional bowl to drink from, slid across the floor like he was a dog, and the tears from his eyes. Now he was breathed full with fresh vitality.

“If I'm an angel, does that make you God?”

“Of course not,” Hannibal answered. “It makes me your tempter.”

When their mouths met again, Will could only taste triumph.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Wine?” Bedelia asked, offering him a glass as he entered her compartment, nerves slowing his movements.

“No thanks,” he answered shortly, glad to receive that same old Bedelia he was used to, clinging to her alcohol for stability. He wondered whether it was a good idea to let her give him medical advice on the complexities of his damaged mind, considering she didn't seem all that healthy herself.

“Take a seat,” she offered, gesturing loosely to one of the chairs that had been positioned in the centre of the room, facing a clone of itself. He sank into it with a reluctant uneasiness, stiffly arranging himself into something that resembled being comfortable, one leg folded over the other as his eyes darted around the room, taking it in. It was far more plush than his, decorated meticulously, the pale colours blending together into a meaningless comfort. It was calming, and exactly what he needed as his anxiety spiked at the prospect of sharing the darkness in his mind with someone other than Hannibal.

It made sense that she had orchestrated it that way, surprisingly, amidst the big question mark that was Bedelia Du Maurier.

To say that this was intimidating was an understatement, one he had shared to Hannibal in the protection of darkness the night before. The nightmares had come again, hungry, spinning their wicked tales in his head as he slept, and as usual, he'd shouted himself raw. With his predictable and soft urging, he'd spoken about Bedelia and her adeptness with *psychiatry*, as he'd called it. Will had been so tired, and so scared. So despite his previous determination to avoid this eventuality at all costs, he'd agreed, voice weighed down with exhaustion and resolve all worn away. And here he was, fear gripping him so tight he could scarcely breathe.

“What, um.” The words felt caught in his throat, and he had to swallow past them to find air. “What am I supposed to say?”

“Whatever you want,” Bedelia said, taking her seat opposite him, gazing at him imploringly. “Why are you here?”

“Because Hannibal wants me to be.”

“How many of your motivations involve Hannibal?”

Her lack of subtlety startled a laugh out of him, for a second letting him forget about the tension holding his body hostage. The smug expectation on her face indicated to him that this had been her intention, but that she was waiting for an answer. He supposed he could marvel at her quick intellect another time, now wasn't quite the time to get into Bedelia's head; instead, he'd be examining his own.

“Right now, a fair amount of them.”

“Hm. Codependency?”

He blinked at her, willing away the impulse to physically shake her words from his head. This wasn't at all what he expected, matter-of-fact, plain statements made about his remarks that weren't at all certain. It was… unconventional, to say the least.

“Probably,” he admitted. “We've been through a lot together. Maybe along the way I just… forgot how to live without him.”

“An understandable sentiment,” she allowed, and tilted her head. “Does that scare you?”

“It used to,” he replied. “For the longest time, I couldn't bring myself to address how I… *felt* about him. But then, I've been in the Games twice. I survived months in Verger's basement. What's so bad about relying on my- Hannibal?”

“Your what?”

“Hannibal.”

“How would you refer to him, though? What is he to you?”

“He's my… friend,” he managed, mind pouring over possibilities.

“He isn't more than that?”

“He is, but… there isn't a word for it.”

Honesty was coming easier than he'd imagined, falling from his lips like honey. When he said there wasn't a word to describe his bond with Hannibal, he meant it. Lover was too much, boyfriend wasn't enough. They transcended definition, lived beyond the capacity of explanation. Hannibal was everything and nothing, all at once.

“I suppose he was your friend first. Still is,” she remarked, and paused as Will heard her pen scratch on paper, dancing across the notebook she held in her hand. “Would you say that's more significant than any romantic feelings toward him? Or less?”

“Neither,” he murmured, pondering aloud. “I wouldn't say it's separate- friendship and romance. They blend into one. It's just… *Hannibal*. It's us.”

Fascination grew in her eyes, which stared at him like he'd said the most curious thing, picking him apart bit by bit. When she spoke again, her voice was slow, calculating.

“Would you say that it's impossible to remove either from the equation of your relationship?”

“Yes,” he agreed, head bobbing with a small nod, thoughts straying, bursting at the seams with heavy memories. “We're conjoined.”

“You seem to be at peace with that.”

“There are worse things.”

Blood, pain, death. An entire life lived in captivity, born and bred to fight in an arena for nothing but the entertainment of others. That had been his existence up until very recently, now hidden away in the fragile safety of District Thirteen, where instead the confinement came in a different form. They meant well, he knew, but that didn't make it any easier. He was growing used to being trapped; perhaps it wasn't so bad. To him, it seemed like the worst thing imaginable was a life entirely without Hannibal.

“The Games, I assume.”

“Yes.”

“The last few months?”

Stiffening, he cleared his throat, once again seized by uncomfortable restlessness. Speaking aloud about Verger's torture was something he'd avoided, and something he wanted to continue avoiding. It was a sensitive subject area, to say the least. But this was exactly why he was here, wasn't it? To share these painful memories that caused him so much discomfort? Yes, it stung to even think of it, sending phantom agony arching up his arms, his legs, his abdomen. Yes, the words were heavy and sticky on his tongue, caught in his teeth like bloody arteries, choking back his voice. If this were the only way to free himself, however, maybe it was a suffering he needed to endure.

“Yes,” he croaked out, voice lessened by his immense, unspeakable fear.

“You think of it often.”

It wasn't a question. It was a truth. A dark, vulnerable truth, and one that didn't need to be confirmed. Will was sure it was written all over his face with the black ink of those tattoos they favoured so dearly in the Capitol.

“All the time,” he managed, and Bedelia almost looked shocked at this timid, terrified shell that sat across from her, trying not to shake as he thought of it all. “It haunts me. Like… condensation on glass windows, or… ashes after a fire. It's an afterthought. It's unwanted. I can't get rid of it.”

“You want to get rid of it?” she inquired, and despite her wording, it wasn't judgemental. It still irked him though, the blatant lack of understanding- a response he'd been receiving a lot, lately. He refused to talk about it, so nobody really understood its extent. Only the doctors had seen the scars, zigzagging across his usually unblemished skin.

“I wish it had never happened. Or that I could pretend it never happened. You have no idea...”

His voice petered off into nothing, plunging into memories of scalpels and starvation, the bright lights of a room full of torture. He hated remembering. It never brought him peace, and it only dragged him back there, strapping him down on that table covered in memories and cracking a whip down on his skin once more.

“You can continue,” she prompted softly, encouraging, but his throat had closed up, sealing off his words from spilling into open air. She appeared to sense this, unfolding her legs so she could lean across the space, taking his hands in hers. Breaths built in his chest, and his hands rested limp and useless in hers. “Will, it's okay. You're safe.”

“I know,” he whispered. “I know. I just...”

“What did he do to you?”

“It's...”

The memories swirled in his brain like thick, viscous poison. Verger's face looming and tilting above him, so distorted by his pain that he seemed to be watching through the eyes of a drunk. The lights so bright, leaving behind white spots in the blackness whenever he squeezed his eyes shut to escape them, to escape the faces and the endless, blinding fluorescence.

Pain.

Nothing but pain. Agony, really. Shooting across his body like bullets of blood in his veins, like a crop brought down against his chest. The welts it left behind were the immovable images stuck in his mind, and they still remained, scarring him to this day. It had been weeks since he'd escaped that forsaken place, but he carried reminders of it pressed upon his very skin. Looking in the mirror was a chore, some days, one that stung his eyes with tears and shocked his chest with sudden, gasping breaths. Memories could be repressed. Scars couldn't be.

Bedelia was still looking at him, still clasping his hands in some desperate hope to comfort him, to ease his hurt and still his climbing levels of stress. Throat still rasping with heavy memory, he gathered all the strength he had and summoned his voice.

“It's unspeakable.”

***

Beverly looked glorious, victorious, poised on a step in the centre of the room. Her head was held high and proud, chin tilted to a sun and a sky that they hadn't seen in far too long. Her hair fell effortlessly down her back, shining in the false sunlight, which made the curves and lines of her face stronger, harsher. Braver.

In a photograph, she would fool Verger himself. But in reality, her position was stiff and her face devoid of passion, things Will *knew* because he was fairly sure he'd witnessed every possible human emotion on her face over their shared life together. And this was nothing but forced courage and uncomfortable resignation; perhaps if this were in the real light of the sun, exposed to its harsh and inescapable truth, the façade would crack. This propaganda certainly worked for District Thirteen, but Will wasn't so sure it would be enough to convince the other Districts. They knew those emotions all too well- they *lived* off them. Beverly looked exactly as she had in the Games: exhausted, reluctant and *trapped*.

She hadn't asked to be their symbol. She hadn't asked to lead their rebellion.

Didn't that make District Thirteen as bad as the Capitol, in a way?

“Perfect, Beverly,” one of the photographers called out, shifting to take pictures from another angle. Will suspected he was likely nothing but a humble technician in reality, as there wasn't much choice of career in Thirteen, with so much to do. That variety probably didn't include photography. “I think we're done here, you can take your break now,” he announced dismissively, distracted as he hopelessly poked at buttons on the camera, a frown caught along his brow.

“Thoughts?” Bev asked as she approached him, sweat beading on her forehead, make up smudged down her face like pale paint.

“On… that?” he prompted, disdain dripping from his voice, bitter honey, sweet vinegar.

With a playful hit to his arm, she led him toward the door, a loose guiding hand on his elbow. “I'm being serious,” she muttered, smiling in acknowledgement to a few people Will didn't recognise, passing them in the doorway.

“So am I,” he admitted, traipsing along behind as she made her way to the flights of stairs. “I don't like that they have you doing that. You aren't some… propaganda piece. Not to most people. Not to me.”

“They aren't forcing me into anything.”

“They shouldn't have asked in the first place.”

“They *had* to,” she suddenly snapped, swivelling to face him with an angry glint burning in her eye, smoking wood. Will could feel it at the back of his throat. “It's all they have. It's what they need. If there's anything I can do, I'm willing.”

“So you're doing this because you want to feel *useful*?”

“*Yes,*” she spat, and all the indignation fell from her body, deflating her visibly. Shoulders slumping and gaze dropping, she sighed. “I need… *something*. After everything, I need *something*. Even if it's just a few photos.”

“You are so much more,” Will said, voice balancing on a breath. “You're worth so much more.”

“Maybe you're right,” she allowed. “But where is 'more'? What is it?”

“It's fighting. Always.”

“*How?*” It finally shut him up, biting back his words that rested on the tip of his tongue, impatient and reckless. “I love you, Will, but you don't have a clue what you're talking about. You were missing for *months* and you haven't been here long enough to understand the political climate from Thirteen's perspective. We can't attack out of the blue. This has to be strategic.”

“And until then, what? You're a prop?”

“If I have to be.”

It felt as if the flame of his temper was slowly being doused with water, a dying fire, turning to nothing but ashes. The embers lay sunken in his gut, igniting sparks of sorrow and nostalgia that seized at his heart, clawing with hot and bloody fingers. He couldn't decide if it was scalding or if the burn was good, warming. All he knew was that the realisation was feverish, unfolding in him like a humid midsummer's evening.

“You've changed,” he declared, and it wasn't meant as an insult, simply an observation.

“So have you.”

All their interactions were bittersweet and bruised, nowadays. Perhaps there was only so much two people could go through together before they recognised that nothing would ever be the same again. Once upon a time they would play on the beach with each other, using their hands as shovels to scoop sand, feeling the grains run through their fingers and smelling the salt on the air. Bev's eyes had been wide and unmarred by the tragedies of the world, and his movements had been quick and sure, a far cry from the skittish uncertainty he held now.

“We can't ever go back, can we?”

“Only in dreams,” she whispered, a sad smile spreading across her mouth. His heart tumbled in his chest, longing, yearning for a different life, a different time. “I miss you. The old you. But I'll take what I can get: you're still him. You're still my Will, no matter what you've been through.”

Exhaling shakily, he brought her against his chest, arms coming up to enclose her in a familiar embrace. She was right, even if it did hurt, even if he did wish she could still be unwise and unbroken by the Games, nothing but a hopeful child who watched butterflies like their wings were strong enough to lift the universe. When his lips pressed into her hair, memories of spring danced in his mind, the provocative promise of new life now fading into the rotting of autumn. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine he was back there, the heat bearing down on him like sun-dipped snow, the smell of grass lingering until he reluctantly washed it off later on, feeling disappear into the water with his mud-tinted skin.

“Don't ever feel like you have to be useful to matter,” he eventually murmured to her, not feeling any urge to withdraw. He couldn't see or feel it, but he knew she was smiling, hidden in the crook of his neck.

Those were the last words that were said for a while, lost to the endless drift of time.

Chapter End Notes

comments and kudos are appreciated <3 there's a big hannigram chapter coming next, I'm hoping to get it out tomorrow - I hope you all enjoy :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Excitement fought off sleep, a restless and unrelenting warrior.

A few hours at least would have been nice, to arrive well-rested and bright-eyed where Hannibal was waiting. But he'd been clutching the note in his fist for most of the day, half-crumpled and warmed from his body heat, and sleep seemed to be an impossible dream as he lay across his bed, impatient and practically counting the seconds in his mind.

Come to the dining hall. After curfew.

It was written in Hannibal's striking cursive, and had been handed over to him with his lunch by a kindly chef, accompanied by a smirk and birthday wishes. He'd waited until he'd eaten to unfold it, hands shaking in irrational fear, food threatening to make a reappearance, to see nothing but a semi-love letter. What he'd expected, he didn't know, but it certainly hadn't been something so simple and harmless.

While he wasn't clear on what the specifics of his late night trip would entail, the occasion of his birthday gave him a fair idea. Probably some kissing and cake, if he was lucky. Perhaps another wooden stag- he'd lost his old one; it had entered Verger's mansion tucked away in his pack, and it had never come back. Had it really been a year since he'd received it? It felt like yesterday. It felt like a decade ago.

Earlier, Abigail had smiled at him, blue eyes like polished sapphires in their sacred underground haven, the only gift he could ever want. The fresh bluebell she'd pressed into his palm had been nothing but an unnecessary sweetness, but it had still elicited tears from him. It was a heavy reminder of his childhood innocence, all those years ago, that had disappeared with him into the arena, where a bluebell had been tucked over his heart. Verger had taken everything from him, bit by bit, brick by brick. Torn him down from the foundations up.

Bluebells belonged to his sixteen year old self, a long-forgotten ghost, unaffected by the blood and terror of the present.

Eighteen, and he felt like eighty.

The dim lighting of the corridor blurred in the corners of his eyes like tinted teardrops as he crept toward the dining hall, padding barefoot through the narrow expanses of Thirteen. He still had trouble navigating his way throughout the maze he now lived in, but he'd been to the dining hall enough to have a vague idea of where to go. It was harder in the dark, though, and near impossible in the quiet. If he was caught out of bed after curfew, then any hope for some time with Hannibal was a lost cause. It wasn't as if they had guards stationed in the corridors, they didn't really have the men to spare for such an unnecessary measure, but there was always the possibility of someone finding him wandering about in the dark, lost and hopeless.

“Hannibal?” he called when he finally reached his destination, pushing open the heavy doors to a sight he hadn't quite anticipated.

Lit with candles, the hall was transformed. They were dotted throughout the room like tiny, flaming stars, throwing out a warm glow that turned a once barren wasteland into some vast romantic fantasy straight out of Hannibal's brain. It should have reminded him of that gloomy cell buried in Verger's dungeons that he felt he had spent so much of his life in, but it didn't. It was soft and tender and Will felt like he was home for the first time in a while; not that cold and empty home bestowed upon him when he won the Games, but his little cabin, his childhood home, the last place he ever saw his father. Fond admiration spread through him at the sight in front of him, molten and hot as it coursed along with his blood, dispersed within it, liquid gold.

Creeping over to the table, more candles came into view, illuminating the set-up of a dinner, two plates separated by a glass: in it, a single lavender rose. When he reached out to run his fingers along it, its petals were supple and intricate. It was a real rose, a rare rose, and Will had no hope figuring out where it came from, only knew that to see it, to touch it, was a privilege.

“Almost every flower you can imagine grows above us.”

Hannibal's silhouette had appeared in the now-open door leading to the kitchen, a large plate balanced in his arms. As he emerged into the candlelight, he became clearer to Will in the dimming light. Content familiarity settled in his chest as Hannibal set the plate down on the table, turning to look at him with that besotted gaze Will knew all too well, brighter than any flame in the room.

“And this was the one you picked?”

“It means love at first sight.”

There was a high flush rising on Hannibal's cheeks that even the soft yellow of the light couldn't hide, an adoring spark alight in his eyes that was captivating, suffocating. He stared at Will like he couldn't quite believe he was there, like he was a mirage in the distance to a dying man, lost in a desert of wanting. Will felt as if he could barely breathe in turn, love caught in his lungs, heavy and sticky like honey, like tar.

“I don't believe in that.”

“I do.”

When Hannibal leant forward to kiss him, mouth ready and hoping, Will presented him with his cheek, turning his head just in time. As lips met skin they paused in surprise, only for a beat, before curving into a smile against the hollow of Will's cheekbone. His heart thundered along in his chest, a storm that was his and his alone. He wondered if Hannibal's was just as fast, or if it was even more so. Resisting the urge to press a hand against his chest to check was harder than usual, his resolve weakened by the vulnerable sincerity of the romantic gesture surrounding him.

“Happy Birthday,” Hannibal whispered into the dim, earnest intensity smouldering in his voice, his gaze, his touch, folding over him like the warmth of a blanket.

His gift was no corporeal giving- it couldn't be, really. What was there to give? Here in Thirteen there was nothing but rubble and grief, materialised in the dark circles under its residents' eyes and the frown lines etched upon their foreheads, so Hannibal was giving all he could: the gift of Time. Time together, time to breathe. A chance to be ordinary, sitting across from one another while sharing a meal, the way Will had longed to do since he'd first discovered that amongst his feelings for Hannibal there were some of a romantic nature. It normalised the two of them, a feat that was arguably impossible when considering both the beginnings of their friendship and their relationship were rooted in violence and abnormality.

But things were different, now.

Yes, there was a war to come, but today? Will had a date.

“I'll admit,” he said, mulling over the words, “I didn't expect any gift at all. This is… more than anything I could ever have expected. Thank you.”

“This isn't it,” Hannibal replied. “I have something for you tomorrow. But you'll see. Nothing but the best for my Will.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only you.”

“How many?” he asked, running his fingertips along the edge of the glass. He felt full, wine and gourmet cuisine settled in his stomach, satisfaction curled around his shoulders like a soft blanket, a transparent shroud.

“How many what,” Hannibal said, and it was barely a question. The wine had disappeared between them rapidly, and Will had lost count of how much they'd drunk- but he could see it Hannibal's face, his voice, his hands. He spoke carelessly, freely, and his gaze was soft and glazed like a cloudy day. His flush had grown darker, dappled across his cheekbones, as red as the wine.

“People.”

“Before you?” His eyes tracked Will's fingers dancing across the top of the glass, only glancing up as he nodded. “A fair few. Not an unreasonably high amount, but I didn't keep count. You're the first I've ever loved, however.”

“I know,” Will replied, and his heart burned with victory when Hannibal quickly dragged his eyes away, unable to keep looking. “When did you learn to cook?”

“You don't know how to cook?”

“Not like this. Was the food that much better in District One?”

“Probably not,” Hannibal admitted, looking down at his plate, wiped clean and pushed aside. “When we first arrived here… You were assumed to be dead. I had a lot of anger, a lot of pain, and the food here in Thirteen is abysmal.”

“So you channelled that pain into *cooking?* Not fighting?”

“I also had a lot of *time*. Enough to do both.”

Will hummed in response, resting his chin on his hand and delighting at Hannibal's lack of disapproval at his bad table manners, watching as he tipped more wine into his glass, the crimson gushing from the bottle like blood from a wound. It had barely sat in the glass for a minute before it was pouring down Hannibal's throat, salve for a thirsting man. Will felt drunker just by looking at him, mind a haze of want and lost, helpless intoxication.

“What do you think of me, Will?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. You've asked me a few questions, it seems only fair that I get some of my own,” he reasoned aloud, thoughts stumbling from his brain, unhindered by sober logic and composure. “What do you think of when you look at me?”

“Destruction. Beauty. Passion.”

“You should write poetry.”

“I'll leave that to you,” Will joked, amusement curling his mouth as he resisted the urge to dart his tongue out and taste the remaining wine on his lips, lingering. “What do you think of when you look at me?”

“A great many things,” Hannibal answered, and it was heavy, words resting in the air long after the exited his mouth. “I think of blood, and… and wine,” he mumbled, slurring a little. Will laughed, attention caught entirely by this open, vulgar version of Hannibal that he'd never dreamed even existed, let alone that he would see it.

“Wine?”

“Yes, wine. Blood, wine, and the rain. I think of stars and… sex.”

Air was sucked from Will's lungs quicker than he could process the words, sending hot spirals of shock through him, making him shiver where he sat. Hannibal seemed completely unaware of the effect of what he'd said, sipping greedily from his glass, of which its contents were swiftly dwindling.

“Sex.”

“You've never thought of sex and I as adjacent?”

“I can't say I haven't thought about it,” Will admitted, recalling many nights alone in his room, hidden in the dark, quiet moans spilling into the silence. “But it's been a while. I've

been slightly distracted for most of the year, and even before… There wasn't a lot of time. We're different from most people our age."

"Oh, certainly," Hannibal agreed. His eyes were darker than ever, black pools in the candlelight. Will was drowning in him, in the toxic want arching between them. "That hasn't ever stopped me wanting you."

"Even now?" Will murmured.

"Especially now."

The tension was thick on his tongue, and when he stood, he felt dizzy. The room was spinning as he moved from the bench, making his way around the table to a waiting Hannibal, who's eyes were fixed on him like a predator in the night. He shifted, pulling his legs from under the table to face Will, approaching steadily, stealthily. His eyes grew wide and his breath hitched in his throat as Will dropped his knee next to Hannibal's leg, hooking his arms around his neck and moving to straddle him.

"And now?"

"Yes," Hannibal rasped.

Will leant down to kiss his neck, mouth hot and wet against Hannibal's skin, brushing against the stubble of his jaw. The fire in his stomach was scorching, growing ever hotter as Hannibal's breathing petered in and out above him.

"Now?" he questioned, voice warm on Hannibal's throat.

"Yes," came the choked reply, hands coming up to seize his waist, holding him there with shaky, desperate grip. "Will-"

"Shut up," he ordered, heart practically beating out of his chest. "For once. Shut up."

Hannibal gasped at that, hands flying to his head, knotting in his hair to drag him up for a messy kiss, lips meeting to taste sweet alcohol and feverish want. They had kissed before, kissed like this, actually. But never had they kissed with the promise of more, with the *possibility* of more, with beds lying in wait only a short distance away. They could do anything. Tonight… it was theirs and theirs alone. Will felt instilled with a new, serene confidence. A perceived ability to do whatever he wanted, and more importantly, that he had the *power* to do so.

"Whose room is closer?" he asked, *demanded*, really, nails pinching into the skin of Hannibal's arm when he didn't answer immediately, panting too hard to speak.

"Yours," Hannibal breathed, his desire smouldering on his face, a smoking flame.

It was a good thing he had Hannibal with him; if he were on his own in the dark and endless corridors he wouldn't find his way back, especially dizzy on wine and giddy on kisses. It still took longer than necessary, however. Walking was hard when wrapped around one another, distracted every few seconds by a seeking mouth, by wandering hands. Hannibal's features

were softened even further by the lights, dimmer still than the candles in the dining hall. His eyes looked full, brimming with heavy need, all directed at Will. It weighed on his heart, his stomach, ever lower.

His back hit a door, and he felt Hannibal fumbling behind him for the handle, refusing to pull away from his mouth. A few seconds of groping behind him, and they were falling backward into the pitch black, plunging into darkness, into the unknown. Blindly searching, his fingers found a switch on the wall, igniting the bedside lamp and throwing out a tiny blue glow, artificial moonlight in the dark. Hannibal didn't shut the door, simply kept pushing, urging, until Will was bouncing down upon the bed, Hannibal climbing atop him. Will shoved at his chest, breaking away for air.

“The door,” he hissed, heart pounding, head swimming. The moments Hannibal spent across the room passed like hours, only coming to a stop as Hannibal's presence returned to him, skin pressing against skin, hand against heart.

“Will,” Hannibal sighed, tongue hot against his. They shifted together, sending bolts of arousal throughout Will's body, shivering, encompassing excitement like nothing he'd felt before. Nothing with Hannibal, anyway. It was like a live wire wherever his skin was touched: his hair, his waist, his back. “Shirt,” Hannibal indicated, fingers dancing along Will's hem.

Tearing it off was a harder task than imagined, but the reward was enough. Hannibal's palms flat upon his bare skin felt like heaven. Like cold water on a hot summer's day, relief and burning need, dripping down his chest with sweat. First his shirt, and then Hannibal's, exposing smooth planes of tanned skin, caramel under Will's seeking hands. In the shining blue, he looked even more alien. Will's great beast, brought to heel above him, quietened by nothing but kisses. Perhaps violence wasn't the only language he spoke in- his talents seemed to extend to other areas, too. Will watched, fascinated, as gooseflesh appeared beneath his touch, accompanied by shaky exhales from a man Will never dreamed he could elicit such tones from.

Hannibal was a man. When Will had met him, he had still been the elegant, striking monster that he was now, but there had been a boyish enthusiasm that had been undeniable, although not recognisable until it was gone. He had grown. The angular lines of his face were no longer a sweet subtlety, but were carved from stone, hard and beautiful for whoever looked upon them. Muscles protruded from his abdomen- not obnoxiously, like many a victor from District 1, with bulging brawn so prominent it was off-putting, but visible. It made Will wonder how he had changed in Hannibal's eyes.

In the hush, he was pressed back onto the bed, Hannibal following him, his body an electrifying weight. Will had never felt so close to him, never felt so inseparable. They were conjoined, after all.

This wasn't like it had been with Molly. She had been soft and harmless, delicate velvet below him. Hannibal was lithe and dangerous and lurid. He was… male. Will wanted him like nothing he'd ever wanted before, but to say he was out of his depth would be an understatement. The last time this had happened had been Matthew Brown, wild and animal above him, hips moving against his so *similarly* and.

And…

Flashes of teeth and forceful cruelty.

The adrenaline coursing through his body was suddenly for entirely different reasons. The panic surging into his lungs was like awakening from a nightmare, a drowning man finally letting the water in, unable to hold off the inevitable any longer.

“Stop,” he gasped, and Hannibal made a confused sound where he was mouthing at his collarbone, and when Will frantically hit at his shoulder, he reared upwards, lust and ardour making him look feverish, feral. Will hauled himself away, flinging backwards against the pillows, chest rising and falling in rapid motion. His head throbbed so hard he could barely see, the blue tint of the room reminding him of lightning and storms and a night he wanted desperately to forget, but couldn't. “I. Stop.”

“Will?” Hannibal asked, concern coming out thickly, marred by want. “Darling?”

Will shook his head, the tears building like waves, and Hannibal took him in his arms again. Gone was the fervent lust, however, and all that remained was the gentle pressure of devotion, of love that was honest and true and one that Will wanted to give everything to, but was too broken by the past. Too damaged.

He was rocked to sleep by the kind lull of Hannibal's embrace, the tender forgiveness of his voice and the dark, parasitic disappointment of his own mind.

Chapter End Notes

I know there are elements of self-hatred here at the end but I want to make it clear I'm not victim blaming - it's just how I imagine Will would see the situation. Hope the chapter was okay!

Chapter 15

“I'm not sure I deserve another present after last night.”

“Will,” Hannibal warned sharply. “We've talked about this. There's nothing to be sorry for. You didn't do anything wrong.”

“I let you down. You wanted-”

“*Will*. Relationships are two-sided. It isn't just about what I want,” he said firmly, with a helpless, fond smile directed toward Will. “Now go in.”

“What is it?”

“You'll see.”

Will felt the air shift as Hannibal left behind him, brushing past him with a comforting graze of fingertips along the nape of his neck. Gift number two had been surrounded with the utmost secrecy despite Will's constant pleas for answers as he'd been led throughout Thirteen after breakfast. Here they were, stationed in front of a door that could have all number of horrors hidden behind it. But it wouldn't, Will knew, because Hannibal would most likely have prepared a surprise more wonderful and thoughtful than anything he could dream up. After last night…

Guilt and embarrassment didn't even begin to cover it. Logically he knew that it hadn't exactly been his *fault*, but his mind had been clouded with irrational emotions for *hours* now, plagued endlessly by memories of a face he yearned to never see again. It was funny how trauma from all those years ago still rested heavy in his heart and loomed over any possibilities for joy he could hope to have this far in the future.

Sure enough, as the door swung open, shocked elation leapt in him, relief soaring like a bird, free and wild.

“Margot?” he ventured, voice but a croak. She smiled, and none of it mattered anymore. They were together in an instant, falling into one another and inhaling reassurance where it hung thick in the air. They were safe. This was all real.

“Are you okay?” she rushed out, pulling away to cup his face, smooth his hair back. His answering smile very nearly cracked his face open, delight so bright and fresh it hurt. He nodded, half-hysterical, and he was sure it was quite a sight by the way she laughed, girlish and relaxed in a way he'd never heard her, not even in the Capitol before… all of it. Now, as her arms drifted back to her sides and she looked at him in awes relief: he took her in.

She was still a shell of the woman she once was, thin and bruised, but she seemed to be filling out her clothes far more than she had been in her cell, with visible bones and hollow eyes. But there was life in her here, a sparkle of tears in her eyes, a shine in her hair, an open

contentment in her touch. There was light around them, finally. Light that illuminated her face, made her real and pretty and no longer hidden away in the gloom of a dungeon.

“I'm okay,” he replied, hoarse. “Never been better, actually. You?”

“I'm… healing,” she admitted, and his heart stung for her. “It hasn't been easy. But the doctors here are good and I still have Alana.”

“Are they letting you have other visitors now?”

“Yeah. In a few weeks I should be… back,” she finished unceremoniously, breathing deeply at the thought of it. Will brushed their fingers together, quick comfort, and watched as her brow furrowed in lost worry. “Out there, is it… Has it been… hard?”

“It was a little at first,” he soothed. “But it got better. I got used to it- it's easy, now. I almost feel at home.”

“That's not exactly where I most want to be,” she said darkly, and with a jolt, Will realised. Verger's mansion… it had also belonged to Margot. She had lived there as her brother had, and had therefore been imprisoned in her *own home* for all those months. His pity for her increased twofold, bursting into his expression with bitter despair.

“No, but… it's safe.”

At that, she only sighed, resigned to the only fate possible for her in the current political climate of Panem. Perhaps one day…

One day. Probably a while from now. Probably after they were all long dead.

“How are you really, Will?” she questioned, soft but steady as she navigated the rocky truths of their shared trauma.

“As good as can be expected, I suppose,” he answered, not finding the same barriers in place that were there with other people. “I still dream about it. Pretty much every night,” he admitted, and paused before speaking again, words that he'd been thinking ever since he arrived in Thirteen. “What happened to us back there… I don't know if it can be fixed.”

She shut her eyes, a shaking exhale escaping from her nose. There was some unnameable pain inscribed upon her face, written in the translucent veins on her eyelids, scrawled along the downturn of her mouth. The signature of sorrow, a binding agreement of misery.

“I know,” she whispered, and her quiet murmur was still far too loud. Deafening, really. “But maybe we can still get better. Even if it's just a little bit.”

“I haven't known the meaning of 'better' since I was sixteen years old,” he muttered. “Your brother's torture isn't the only thing I have nightmares about.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I know,” he said, too fast and too snappy. She blinked in surprise at his tone, and remorse rose in him just as quickly at the sight of it. “It isn't your fault. And your life hasn't exactly been *fantastic*.”

“I don't know… Mason *did* always give me the better desert when we were kids,” she confessed, amusement glinting in her eyes, and it made Will grin. This was the woman he'd once known, quick-witted and strong, and with the freedom to be whatever she wanted. Thirteen was nobody's dream home, but children weren't forced to fight to the death, and they didn't answer to an insane, rampaging dictator. It was better than before by a long shot.

“It's good to see you smiling,” Will observed, unbridled affection a passenger in his tone. “I've really missed you, Margot.”

“I've missed you too,” she said, and her hand was on his cheek again, curving against his jaw. “Just… don't worry yourself with all this talk of war,” she pleaded. “There might be one, there might not, but… you shouldn't be involved. Don't preoccupy yourself with my *brother*, of all people. Not after what he did to us. Be free, Will. Eat their shitty food and kiss your boyfriend and be with your sister again. Be free for me.”

“I can't make any promises,” he professed, and Margot's jaw clenched in response. “But I'll damn well try.”

Margot's smile was a view he didn't think he'd ever get sick of.

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Last night's events had avoided creeping up in his thoughts during his meeting with Margot, but hit him square in the face when he entered the dining hall, immediately spotting Hannibal sitting at one of the tables, seemingly deep in conversation with Brian and Jimmy. Gideon was there too, of course, because he was everywhere nowadays. At least there weren't too many people, but enough that it would be impossible for them to have a quiet conversation without the others overhearing. That, instead, would have to wait.

“Do you think they figured out who used all those candles in here the other night?” was Bev's opening line, manoeuvring herself in next to Brian on the bench, sliding her tray recklessly onto the table. Hannibal met his eyes, lips pressed together to prevent laughter. They all *knew*- it was fairly obvious, but it nobody quite wanted to say it.

“I think that might remain a mystery,” Hannibal answered loftily, poking at his food with his fork, gaze back on his dinner.

“Shame,” Bev shot back, smirking.

“I think they're probably focused on… other matters,” Gideon interjected, not looking up from the book he had open. “A few candles never hurt anyone.”

“Military matters, you mean?” Jimmy asked, fervent curiosity painted on his face.

There was an endearing childlike quality to the naivety of those from the Capitol. The lack of understanding, the inquisitive ignorance; it was glaringly obvious whenever Jimmy, Brian or Chilton opened their mouths. At least with Brian and Jimmy it was willing, though. Chilton simply seemed put out and reluctant. Will wasn't quite sure why they were here, sometimes. Well, most of the time. How would getting rid of Verger benefit them?

“Most likely,” Gideon retorted, finally glancing up at them, a smug smile curling his mouth. “Not that you'll be allowed to involve yourself, Price.”

Jimmy looked a little hurt at the acid in his tone, and Will had to remind himself of Jimmy's origins to explain it. Raised and pandered in the Capitol didn't really allow a lot of room for interacting without a stifling amount of enthusiasm and eagerness. The slightest irritation was taken more seriously than that of an ordinary person.

“Still. It isn't like you need to be completely in the dark,” Bev added, throwing a dark look Gideon's way. He only raised his eyebrows in response, unaffected, and closed his book with a slap.

“I have business to attend to,” he said, rising from the table, snatching up his book and leaving his tray behind, half-eaten and picked at.

“What possible business...” Bev trailed off.

“He unsettles me,” Brian declared, staring after his retreating figure, judgement in his voice.

“He unsettles all of us,” Will admitted, eyes drawn to him in the same way.

Abel Gideon was a mystery, but it was not in the delicious, magnetic way that Hannibal had been. It was cold and repulsive, setting off alarm bells in Will's head that he'd only really heard with people like Budge or Ingram. This wasn't the Games, however, and he couldn't simply confront Gideon in the way he'd been able to then, despite how much he wanted to. No, all he could do was sit through cryptic conversations and overthink it.

“Maybe they're just… *different*, here,” Bev argued, but it didn't wipe the suspicion from her expression. “They were raised underground, after all.”

“Like our upbringing was that much better,” Will muttered, snide.

“I do wonder,” Hannibal pondered, “if he hates Bella Crawford so much… Does his 'business' have anything at all to do with her?”

“What?”

“Are you saying he's *plotting*?”

“I'm not saying anything. I'm *wondering*.”

A disturbed lull descended upon them, a near-audible pause as Hannibal's words were considered. Gideon was *odd*, sure, but did that necessarily mean he was attempting to sabotage the President? The idea made Will's gut feel funny, heavy and unsure, doubt an

unwanted but persistent presence in his mind. It also raised the question: if he was really plotting, and it was a big if, was he doing it alone? Who else couldn't be trusted?

History was known to repeat itself, Will supposed. Here he was again, surrounded by potential enemies, in an inescapable situation with only a few people to depend on. He felt old beyond his years, exhausted by his own life. Was this all there was? Would one tragedy always lead to another? Perhaps he'd never free himself from this insidious cycle of pain, going round in circles until his heart eventually gave out and his legs buckled beneath him.

“Should we tell President Crawford?” Jimmy asked, looking increasingly off-colour. Will couldn't blame him- Capitol coddling didn't quite prepare an individual for this, secured underground with strangers who might be out to sabotage the only hope of freedom.

“No. There isn't any evidence, and Hannibal could be wrong,” Will explained, and Hannibal scoffed across from him. His arrogance should've been aggravating, but it only served to send heat swirling in Will, hot desire purring in his chest, wanting. “Don't listen to everything he says.”

“But… just in case?” Jimmy suggested, voice quiet and fearful.

“It might just make her suspect *us*,” Will said, brain skipping over the possibilities. “She has far less reason to trust us than one of her own. Gideon grew up here, and we're outsiders. It looks like we're trying to pass off the blame, especially if there's *no proof*. Leave it, Jimmy. Don't concern yourself with wondering.”

Almost visibly deflating, Jimmy nodded, worry still working steadily behind his eyes. Will had been a little snappy, but he knew he was right. And if he were lucky, Hannibal was wrong. Maybe he was seeing enemies everywhere after the Games; Will had felt a lot like that the other year, jumpy and suspicious of someone as potentially threatening as a Peacekeeper, right down to those that were really unlikely, like the innocent baker selling him bread. It was a period of his life that felt muted and grey whenever he thought of it, brightened only by memories of Molly and occasional reunions with Hannibal. It had been miserable, and not all that different to now. Perhaps that was what his life was destined to be: dull lengths of time interspersed with great bouts of violence, droughts followed by torrential storms. Neither were preferable, both were extremes. Would he ever find peace? A peace that wasn't empty and unfeeling?

Hannibal caught his gaze again, looking thoroughly amused and not the least bit worried. It made annoyance and attraction rise in Will, a seeking blood rush.

It made Will *feel*.

Chapter 16

District Thirteen may not have had the greatest pickings of food, but one thing it did have? Alcohol.

Fermentation occurred quickly down here, and there were enough shortages that nothing could afford to be wasted. Will felt a little reckless, sure, since he'd gorged himself on wine only the other day, but the ending of that night hadn't exactly been *ideal*. And if his friends turned up at his door with a bottle of liquor and a promise of more, then who was he to refuse? There were things he needed to forget, if only for a little while. There were sorrows he needed to drown.

And that was how he ended up slumped on the ground a few hours later, surrounded by empty bottles and the toppled forms of the others, equally as drunk as he was. He'd missed this. Getting drunk with his friends was easy and simple and *ordinary*, something he and Bev *used* to do, even before all of this. They'd been fourteen when she'd first stolen some spirits from her mother's cupboard, smuggled them to the beach where they'd met and laughed under the stars. If they were especially fortunate, one of the other kids would invite them out to bigger gatherings, give them a chance to be *teenagers*, to be free for just one night. It wasn't something he'd done often, and he'd mostly declined invitations like that after the Games in favour of drinking himself to sleep in the solitary privacy of his own room, but he hadn't quite realised how much he'd missed it.

“I love you,” he mumbled to Bev, poking at her face where she sat opposite him. “I love you so much.”

“Is this a confession?” she wondered, muffled.

“No, stupid. I have Hannibal.”

“I have Georgia.”

“We still haven't talked about that.”

“What is there to say?”

“Don't be mean,” Will accused, pouting as she groaned, hauling herself to sit up. “I talked to you about Hannibal.”

“Yeah, well,” she dismissed, “you two are a lot more dramatic.”

“Just because you don't have some fantastical, televised love story, it doesn't mean I don't want to hear about it,” he pointed out, shifting up to look at her properly. Conversations buzzed and faint music played in the background, some random recording from years ago, long before any of them were born. She looked at him through the chaos and in his hazy, intoxicated mind, he thought she'd never been more beautiful, eyes bleary and hair tangled, but expression loose and open, the closest she'd been to happy in a while.

“I love her,” she whispered, smiling dreamily, eyes drifting past Will to where she was presumably sitting. “I always thought she was beautiful, but then… back when we were running, in the Games. We didn't know what to do, or where to go. We weren't sure anybody was coming for us. And she kissed me,” she explained, slurring her words. “She kissed me and suddenly I didn't care that we might be about to die.”

“For the record, I'm glad you didn't.”

“I think I got the good end of the deal,” she admitted, staring at him all sad. “I wish you'd talk to me about what happened to you back there.”

“I don't. You don't deserve the nightmares,” he remarked drily, sipping from his half-full bottle and watching as her face creased in sympathy and sick curiosity.

“What did he do to you, Will?”

Drunk as he was, the barrier blocking him from talking about that stuff was still in place. Less secure, sure, but there nonetheless. Liquor freed his tongue but it didn't fundamentally change him, and those months, what Verger did, what he *experienced*… it ran deep. Too deep for even the urging hands of alcohol to reach.

“Everything you can imagine,” he finally answered, feeling a little queasy. “And I have the scars to prove it.”

“I believe you,” she breathed, the pain in her face unmatchable to any time he'd ever seen her.

She put her bottle aside and leant across the small distance between them, reaching for his hand. Her palm was clammy but then so was his, and it wasn't as if he was in any state to care. Their hands fit together as well as they always had, and the surge of affection he felt for her in that moment brought tears rushing to his eyes, stinging and unwelcome. There was nothing to be said and they both knew it. All they could do was hold one another.

“Where's Hannibal?” came a sudden voice behind him, loud and unsteady as Brian dropped down beside him, followed by Georgia, who instead went to her girlfriend. They were clearly unaware of the conversation topic, barrelling over all happy and drunk, putting an end to the short but emotional exchange Will and Beverly had been sharing. Bev drew back sharply, letting his hand go so Georgia could fall onto her, grinning wildly and pouring out sentiment like blood.

“I don't know. Something about teaching Abigail how to cook,” Will muttered, letting his head fall onto Brian's shoulder.

His relationship with Brian and Jimmy was an odd one. Despite the fact that they had been instrumental in his preparation for the Games, he couldn't blame them. They were like Alana, really. Technically perpetrators, but no guiltier than the audience itself. They had no control over Verger, and had only sought to do what they loved: share their view of beauty through the art of make up. Perhaps their relationship was only odd because *they* were, rich and privileged with no reason to give it all up to be here, but here nevertheless. It didn't make sense to him, but he appreciated it.

“You sure he isn't just training her instead?” Bev asked, indicating her head to where Miriam sat the other side of the room, engrossed in conversation with Jimmy. There weren't many of them here, and while Will had tiptoed around the idea of inviting people like Peter or even Reba, Bev had insisted that they were too old, as much as she liked them.

“Pretty sure. Don't get me wrong, she's probably managing to do it *somewhere*, but I don't think Hannibal would risk it after what happened last time.”

“Your sister is *so much cooler than you*,” she replied, breaking out into laughter and dragging Georgia with her, some sickly sweet display of love. It shivered in his chest, made his heart skip with happiness for her. Beverly deserved all the love and joy that this forsaken world had to offer, and the fact that she had found it with another of his friends warmed him deeply.

“Rude,” he responded, lifting his head up with a rush of dizziness, unable to prevent the smile that stretched across his mouth. “But it's all my influence, I can assure you.”

“I will admit,” Georgia interjected, “you are pretty cool.”

Bev gasped in mock hurt, shoving her off her lap, sending them all giggling. It felt like an age since he'd talked to Georgia, and to have her hurtling back into his life in such a way left him breathless with delight, basking in her presence like it was the same rough liquor he was drinking. He was giddy enough as it was, and she was only making it worse. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though. He'd desperately needed some time to unwind, and this was practically perfect if he ignored the mess they'd made and the inevitability of Abigail returning soon and seeing him in this state.

“You should've seen him when he first arrived in the Capitol- you wouldn't be saying the same then,” Brian joked, seemingly laughing at the memory before promptly shutting up once he saw the wounded look Will was throwing him. “What? You were kind of a mess. The colours you wore were *incredibly* unflattering and I don't think you'd ever used a hairbrush in your life.”

“I was sixteen and *not* a professional member of a prep team. Cut me some slack.”

“Wouldn't kill you to trim your nails once in a while,” Brian mumbled, and it was such a *ridiculous* thing to say, and Will's head was such a blurry mess, that nothing had ever been funnier to him.

It felt good to laugh, and it especially felt good to laugh like this. Indulgent and uninhibited, long and lasting, *meaningless*. It felt good to laugh over nothing again. It felt good to laugh over *something*, anything, to laugh because he was allowed. Because he felt like it. He was entitled to a bit of laughter every once in a while, and he would do well to remember that. Maybe it was the only thing that would keep him sane down here, confined below the ground, preparing for a war he would most likely lose. Laughter and Hannibal and his friends. And alcohol, of course. His favourite things in the world, the only possessions he could hope to retain throughout it all.

“Brian,” he said, noticing how the girls had been distracted by one another, faces close and hushed words floating between them. “Brian… why are you here? I don't understand… I

don't get why you're here."

"I wanted to get drunk? What do you me-"

"No, like. *Here*. In District Thirteen. You could've stayed in the Capitol. Why didn't you?"

"We're not all that shallow," he answered, quiet, intense. "I just didn't realise… The Games, they're glorified. I'd only been working there for a few years, and you were my first victor. I guess I just didn't understand the damage it all did until I saw you after... I could basically count your ribs, Will," he confessed, eyes glazed with memories. "You're a real person. Somebody I *knew*, and I'd been watching you nearly die. For *weeks on end*. All of my previous tributes, I'd never seen them again. But you… I suppose seeing the impact affected me more than I thought it would."

His explanation was a fragile one, random trains of thought eloping with slurred speech, but Will understood the intentions behind it. Brian and Jimmy were young. Older than Will, older than Hannibal, but still young. He'd been raised to enjoy the Games, to support them, and as much as Will *despised* it, the truth was that he had no way of knowing any different. And when he had known different, he'd *changed*, he'd adapted and come here to help. His complicity stung, but then so did a lot of things, these days. It stung that his mother had died and he hadn't been able to save her. It stung that he couldn't go home, that he and everyone he cared about was in hiding. Most of all, it stung that Verger was sitting rich and pretty with the citizens of Panem under his thrall, with more control than Will had held throughout his entire life.

The liquor stung, burning warm at the back of his throat, settling in his stomach, buzzing in his brain. It made him feel light, a far cry from the heavy burden that had rested on his shoulders the past few weeks. At long last: freedom.

"Thank you," he said. "I know this is probably… weird for you. Hard to adjust to. But I'm glad you're here, Brian."

"It's not easy, but… I know how lucky I was," he replied, nodding as he spoke, unfocused. "I know I made the right decision. Pretty sure this is the winning side, Will."

"I'm not so sure about that," Will admitted, not quite feeling so light anymore. The subject did hold a lot of weight, after all. "The power he has..."

"Well, winners or not," Brian interjected, "I chose the *right* side."

Will's hand came to rest on his knee, his gratitude gratitude through touch, and Brian grinned at him. The rush of warmth he felt toward him wasn't unprecedented, and it was nice to be able to trust someone without the worry that their best interests were harmful to him. Of course, *now* he could trust Georgia, and after a while he'd been able to in the Games as well. But he couldn't have been sure at first; he hadn't been able to allow himself weakness like that. It was one of the many examples of how his life had changed living here- he *could* trust, if he wanted. And he did want to, desperately so. It made everything a whole lot easier.

But then again, not everybody was so trusting.

“*Will*?” Hannibal questioned after the door banged open, staring in open shock at the sight before him. The room was a wreck, with bottles strewn about the floor and half-conscious teenagers lying with them. Hannibal, with his unfaltering composure and persistent elegance, was likely disgusted at the display of raucous youth he'd probably not thought his darling Will capable of.

“Hi,” Will responded, sheepishly poking his head out from behind Brian to see Hannibal and Abigail standing in the doorway. Abigail looked thoroughly amused with the situation, where Hannibal simply looked confused. Will watched as he blinked, swallowing, regaining his control, a waking monster. When he opened his eyes, all shock was gone from them, as was any other emotion.

“I think you should all leave,” he uttered stonily, before striding across the room and shutting off the music with a click. Will had been transfixed with it for half the night, watching the black circle spin round and round and produce music as a result. Their ancestors had been clever, there was no doubt. Just not clever enough to prevent their descendants from living in a world like this.

“Hannibal-” It was Beverly who spoke, but he silenced her with a look, one made of ice and anger. He looked like a boy Will used to know. A boy that he'd met as a cold, impassive gladiator, born and bred for nothing but killing. Will hated him like this. Will loved him like this.

There were a few grumbles here and there, but Hannibal was frightening enough that people filed out pretty quickly, Miriam with a sunny smile in his direction, Jimmy with a parting wave, and Brian with a friendly pat on the shoulder, which Hannibal eyed shrewdly. Something about his gaze made Will's skin prickle. Worse still, Hannibal even ushered Bev and Georgia out, an indication that Will was, perhaps, in quite a lot of trouble. It only made his stomach sink further when Hannibal turned to Abigail.

“Stay in my compartment tonight,” he instructed. “I need to talk to your brother.”

“Hannibal,” she began, and didn't pale at the cold fury in his expression, only rolled her eyes. It was defiant and it made pride rise in him like a mounting tide. When had Will's little sister grown up so much? A few years ago she would've trembled where she stood, fragile and timid. Now she looked as if she was *daring* him to contradict her. “Don't you think you're being a little harsh?”

“You shouldn't have to see him in this state,” Hannibal sneered, glancing over to where Will was still half-collapsed on the ground, now leaning against the wall. “It's embarrassing.”

“You think I haven't seen him like this before?” Abigail asked, laughing. “He's my *brother,* and he's eighteen. It used to happen all the time back home.”

“I wouldn't say *all the time*,” Will protested, but it was pretty funny. He'd missed this. He'd missed *her*.

“Okay, well. Semi-regularly. It's fine, honestly-”

“Please, Abigail,” Hannibal cut in, and now Will *knew* it was serious. Interruptions? From *Hannibal Lecter?*

Looking between them, Will saw surprise on her face as well, and hesitation. A surge of hope let him hold onto the idea that she might just stay, and at the very least be here for the lecture he was likely about to receive. She looked between them, considering, and the second she made her decision it was clear. Her face evened out in resignation, and Will's hope dissolved, fizzling into nothing as she moved to the door.

“He's all yours,” she finally sighed, shooting Will one last sympathetic glance and darting out from the room, the door slamming shut behind her. Silence fell as soon as she disappeared, lingering for a few unbearable seconds, ticking past in slow motion, painstaking, excruciating. But of course, like everything, it came to an end. Hannibal rounded on him then, turning and facing him with disappointment seeping throughout his features, like rain falling upon his face. Will missed the rain. He missed the open air and the weather and the sky, and he really, really missed his mom.

“What are you doing, Will?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” he snarled, gesturing wildly at the mess. “This isn't you.”

“I don't know who you think I am, Hannibal,” he snapped, unsteadily climbing to his feet, swaying, “but clearly it *is*.”

“This is… crude. It's unnecessary,” he spat, and none of it made sense. It wasn't like they hadn't shared multiple bottles of wine only the other day. Yes, this was a little more downmarket and things may have gotten a little out of hand, but that wasn't the issue. Even through the drunken haze, Will could *tell*. Something else was going on here. “And… Brian. You can't...”

“What about him?”

“Your hand was…” His voice cut off abruptly, caught in his throat. His mouth twitched in unconstrained rage, baring his teeth, and he dragged his gaze to the floor. It was pain and possessiveness, undiluted and wild, bubbling under the surface of his skin. The room was suddenly very, very hot, and there was a sincere intensity when Hannibal looked at him again, eyes boring into his. “You're mine, Will.”

“What are you insinuating?” he enquired, attempting to piece together the conversation, and watched as Hannibal shifted uneasily, now at a loss for what to say. His hand. Brian. It *fit*, but that didn't mean Will *understood*- Hannibal was supposed to be the smart one. “Me and *Brian*? Because my hand was on his knee?”

“It isn't just… The way he looks at you,” Hannibal muttered, and Will snorted a laugh, too distracted to care about the slight hurt that slipped into Hannibal's expression, exposing that seldom-seen vulnerability that Will treasured so dearly.

“What, with *friendliness*? He doesn't look at me like *anything*, and even if he *did*, do you think he'd do it with his boyfriend in the room?” Will prompted, and Hannibal's face shuttered at the words, falling into recognition and slight shame. Will huffed, shaking his head and finally realising exactly what the real problem was here. “Are you *jealous*?”

“I-” It was cut off by a swallow, uncharacteristically awkward for the ever-smooth Hannibal. “Sorry.”

“Get out,” Will ordered, turning away and flopping onto his bed, hearing nothing but quiet surprise from Hannibal. “Send Abigail back. We can talk in the morning.”

“Will-”

“*Leave.”*

Hannibal had to go. Will couldn't look at him right now, shocked by the sudden and violent realisation that this was their countless fight in recent days, and that that might mean... It should've been fine, because couples fought, right? It was healthy? Or expected, at least? Common? It was just...

Will had thought there'd be peace, if only for a little while. They didn't half deserve it, plagued by nothing but hardship throughout the entirety of their relationship. Now, there was nothingness, a stillness. A chance to breathe. And yet, they still argued, setting the air alight with angry barbs, thrown cruelly at each other. The other week it had been over the menu at breakfast and now it was over an innocent touch between friends. It raised a daunting question in Will's mind, one that was making his stomach turn in sickness and his head pound. Then again, that might've been the alcohol.

But what if… what if they weren't sustainable?

Chapter 17

“Simply attacking would be unwise.”

“If we wait, we lose our advantage!”

“What advantage? Our lack of troops? Our inability to enter the Capitol undetected?”

“Verger is incapacitated right now, but he *will* heal-”

“Stop!” Bella interrupted, and the room fell into awed silence at her voice. “You both have valid points, but I digress: I'm worried you're more concerned with contradicting one another than actually working together to improve Panem,” she remarked, and they both paled, all disagreements wiped from their mouths. Bella smiled at them, serene, and turned to Pazzi. “Rinaldo, what are your thoughts?”

“I can't disagree with either strategy,” Pazzi admitted, sighing, and then they were back to square one. Meetings like these mostly just made Will's head hurt. Not only were they talking with logic he didn't fully grasp, but most time was simply wasted by those with stronger personalities arguing with each other. Today, it was Chiyoh and Sogliato- a recurring theme. “It's fair to say that after our impromptu rescue mission, all element of surprise is off the table, no matter when we decide to attack.”

A groan rippled throughout the room, and Will watched Sogliato's already pinched expression grow more sour. He'd made his distaste for that situation quite clear, both in meetings and while he'd been there. Will vaguely remembered him, that lone and defiant voice from the crowd, making itself known only seconds before Hannibal had snapped Verger's neck. Which likely wouldn't have happened if Pazzi was there, something Will was glad for, even if it did make for a more hostile environment to live in. He of course didn't understand the specifics, but it had been heavily implied that Pazzi had refused to run the mission, despite Bella's authorisation. Hannibal had been appointed to lead it instead of Sogliato, and… it was a mess, and a fairly political one at that. Bev had said: to put it quite simply, nobody likes anybody. It always rang true the minute Will stepped into the conference room. People could eat lunch together, laughing like friends, and then come in here and fight like desperate tributes, clawing at one another to survive. Will supposed it was born of good intention rather than the basic need to stay alive, however, a redeeming trait that couldn't exactly be applied to the Games.

“Will?” someone asked, and he glanced up to see Chiyoh gazing at him expectantly. “You probably know the President better than anyone here- what do you think he'd be expecting least?”

“I…” He trailed off, at a timid loss for words, and felt Hannibal's hand seek his in comfort. They often asked things like this, assuming that five months locked in Verger's mansion allowed him a special insight into his soul, or something. He still always felt like he was letting them down when he could never give a concrete answer. “I'm really not the right

person to ask. I'd say talk to Margot, when she's well enough. I do know Verger, but… not like that."

"What do you think would be best, though?" she urged, and all eyes in the room were now fixed on him.

"Wait, I guess," he muttered, and she grinned triumphantly, leaving Sogliato to huff in irritation. "He'll heal, but… not very well. And I think… I think we need the support of the other Districts. For this to really work. We don't have that, not yet."

"That's why we have Beverly," Jack interjected. "She's there to inspire them- they already see her as a rebel, in a sense. They already respect her. They *will* support her, and by association, us."

"*When*?" Bev herself spoke up, irritation stinging in her voice. "All we've done is take a few pictures, record a few messages. They're worthless without anybody to listen. So many of you want to attack *now*, which we can't do without the support of the Districts, which we can't *get* without the distribution of all this ridiculous propaganda! If you think attacking now will be in any way helpful, you're delusional."

Her words hung in the room, thick smoke. Will saw Sogliato's jaw clench in frustrated acknowledgement as he glared at the floor, saw Chiyoh smirk in grateful recognition in Bev's direction, Bella blink in surprise at the force behind her voice. She regained her composure quickly enough, straightening in her chair and raising her chin, the same unwavering, stubborn pride Will recognised so often in Jack making an appearance on the face of his wife. They really were made for each other.

"So our next move is to get the Districts on our side?" she asked, and Bev nodded, looking a little sheepish after her outburst.

"I think so. I don't see how we can continue without them," she confessed, steadfastly ignoring multiple sets of eyes boring into her skull, anger in their faces.

"We can still win," Sogliato piped up, and Bella shut her eyes in exasperation. "We don't *need* them."

"There isn't enough of us," Chiyoh snapped. "You don't know what it's like up there. We need more men, and we need a guarantee that the Capitol won't be able to call on its citizens for help."

"You really think they'd side with Verger?" Pazzi questioned.

"Better the enemy you know," Chiyoh replied. "We could be worse than him- they can't be sure. If we simply burst in without them having any idea who we are, support will be divided. Trust me."

"How do you suggest we let them know who we are?"

Hannibal's voice was cool comfort as it slipped into the room, something Will had sorely missed. They hadn't really spoken since last night, only in civilities as they entered the conference room with everyone else. Will's head had hurt far too much for him to drag himself to breakfast or even lunch, and he'd been grateful for the food Abigail had smuggled back for him. That way he could stay in bed *and* avoid Hannibal. He couldn't any longer, but he was glad he was here. Hannibal was needed in this chaos, a steady presence that felt as if it had always been by his side. Even when they were fighting, he was undeniably helpful.

“Well, we'd need to do it without the Capitol's knowledge,” Chiyoh said, sighing. “Which won't be easy.”

“Easy? I think that'd be impossible,” Jack remarked. “The other solution is to storm in. Take the Districts one by one.”

“Is *that* who we are?” Will enquired, feeling the fury right down to his bones. “People who are willing to invade the *Districts*?”

“We'll explain to them once we-”

“Once we seize their home? Indoctrinate them into our cause?”

“It's necessary, Will,” Hannibal cut in, and a fresh wave of betrayal pierced the air. Will turned to him, mouth down-turned in rage. It didn't help that there was already tension brewing between them, left to fester since the night before. “It's the only chance we have.”

“They have to join us by choice. We can't be like Verger, we can't...”

“We *aren't*,” Hannibal argued. “But compromises have to be made. For the greater good.”

“There has to be another way,” he said. Hope was dying within him, quivering where it rested in his heart, shrinking by the second. Maybe it was because he was still raw from last night, headache only now dying down and mind not yet entirely clear, but everything felt fraught and delicate. The faint beginnings of tears were stinging his eyes, but he was too grasped by intense emotion to blink them away. “There's always another way.”

Will didn't like to think of himself as dramatic. He was a realist at best, a pessimist at worst. Most things in his life were matter-of-fact, and he viewed them as such. But… Hannibal. When it came to Hannibal, nothing made sense. When it came to Hannibal, dramatics were always an occurrence. Perhaps it was Hannibal's own nature that simply rubbed off on him, gave him that extra kick of emotion that ignited a passion in him that he never felt with anybody else. He could get drunk on those feelings, really, but it was a short high. When they eventually faded they left nothing but a burnt out taste and pieces to pick up and put back together. It wasn't easy, but then relationships never were. Hannibal was a lot of things, but easy wasn't one of them.

The only question left to ask was whether or not it was *worth* it.

“Not today.”

Vision blurring, Hannibal became a haze in his eyes. It didn't last for long: he disappeared when Will stormed from the room, Hannibal's words ringing in his ears and hurt bursting in his chest.

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Alana's face softened when she saw him, and didn't ask, immediately taking him into her arms instead. Something in his chest *tugged* when her arms came up to surround him, something that reminded him so painfully of his mother. She had hugged like this, full and honest and with complete abandon. It made everything okay, if only for a little while. Times like these he thought so desperately of her, *longed* for her, for her kind wisdom and steadfast toil. She was gone forever, now. Alana was potentially the closest thing he had.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, urging him over in the direction of the chairs and shutting the door behind him. It was enclosing, but the isolation eased his nerves, something he was in dire need of after the morning he'd had.

“No,” he muttered, and exhaled, lengthy, as soon as he said it. “Well. I probably should.”

“Am I the right person for that?” Alana asked gently, taking a seat opposite him. Her voice was careful, tiptoeing around whatever was upsetting him. He appreciated it, especially since he didn't have a clue where to start. The issue was a complex one- or at least it was in *his* head. “Bedelia wouldn't be a better option?”

“It's not the hard stuff,” he admitted, and Alana's expression flickered in understanding. It didn't take a genius to work out what that was referencing. “It's Hannibal stuff.”

“How bad?”

“I don't know how bad, if I'm being honest.” He felt himself grimace, and her hand drifted over the table to clutch his. “That's part of the problem.”

“Is it him or you?”

“It's both of us.”

She winced, and his stomach dropped. He hadn't wanted to talk about it for this exact reason. Her reaction was only solidifying what he already knew: he and Hannibal might just be falling apart. He'd held onto the hope that it was nothing, that it was only hard because of the political climate and that once all of this was over, they'd be able to put themselves back together. But a part of him had known just how deep this ran, the same part that was whispering to him that all of this was because they *didn't know how to be normal*.

“Have...” Alana sighed, and Will watched through distant eyes as she rubbed a hand over her forehead, words not coming as easily as they usually did. “Have you told him you feel this way?”

“No. Should I?”

“Probably. Communication typically improves relationships,” she advised, and he nodded, worry building at the thought of having a conversation like this with Hannibal. He didn't know if he could bear it. What if it ended badly? What if everything went wrong? “Can I ask… what's been happening, exactly? Arguments?”

“Yeah, but… it's over little things. Over *nothing.* And it's *constant*,” he sighed, not sure whether he was glad or concerned that his irritation had begun to overpower his fear. “It's just… it wasn't like this, before. In the Games. Everything around us might've been a mess but we *worked*. Now it just feels so… forced. So stressful.”

“I would say keep trying, but… if he's making you unhappy, Will… you need to do what's best for you,” she finally settled on, and it only made his heart squeeze tighter, resenting the advice that he had asked for. “Even if it hurts. It will hurt, but it could be better in the long run.”

“What are you saying? *End* it?”

“Maybe,” she confessed, and it made his heart ache within his chest, confined below layers of flesh and muscle and blood. It was real and nothing but an organ that kept him alive, not some fictitious embodiment of love, but the thought of losing Hannibal made it feel like exactly that. Like it was being crushed in a fist somehow, turned to bloodied pulp in the cavity of his ribcage.

“I don't know if I can do that.”

“Nobody ever does. But listen, Will… sometimes, relationships… they fall apart.” Alana was doing the best she could, voice slow and soft, but it wasn't much use. The concept of losing Hannibal wasn't something he was willing to entertain, however convincing her explanation was. “It's never easy, but it can necessary. In a year you might look back and be grateful you found the strength to do it.”

“I don't have that strength,” he assured her, thoroughly shaken by her words. “Alana, you don't understand-”

“Look at you, you're *miserable*,” she accused, helpless sympathy in her expression. “I think you two are wonderful together, don't get me wrong, but… perhaps some time apart would help.”

“Wording it differently won't suddenly make me want to leave him,” he muttered, a little snide. “I'm not miserable, it's just… there's a rough patch, right now.”

“If it's nothing more than a rough patch then why are you here talking to me?” she probed kindly, sighing when he looked at her, bewildered. “You could be talking to Hannibal about this. You tell him practically everything, after all. But you aren't. You're here. And I think a part of you *wants* to hear this, *needs* to. I'm not saying break up with him. I'm just saying don't rule it out.”

His heart was singing in pain, but he nodded, trusting Alana enough to believe that she only wanted the best for him. He felt childish, doing this. Running to her and complaining about

this, of all things, while Margot rested up only a few doors down the corridor, recovering from wounds of all sorts. Both psychological and physical, potentially scarring her for life, inescapable and ugly on a woman who was anything but. Not only that, buy war wasn't far from being declared, the mounting tension whenever the Capitol was brought up in conversation too pressing to ignore for much longer. It was all about to explode, no matter how any of them tried to prolong it; Will could tell, could taste it in the air like the salt from the sea. It would be war and it would not be pretty. People would die and there was a chance, a frighteningly large one, that it would mean nothing.

That freedom would not, despite their tireless efforts, be achieved.

His petty problems with Hannibal were nothing in comparison, he knew, but they still caused agony to the highest degree. That was love, he supposed.

It was the reason they were fighting this war in the first place.

Chapter 18

The conference room was beginning to feel more and more like a prison cell as the days sped by, hands on a clock that were spinning too fast. And Will knew all about cells: saw one every night in his dreams, felt the steel rust beneath his fists and smelt the sizzle of burning flesh. Then, of course, he woke, tears in his eyes and blood in his mouth where he'd bitten into his tongue, too harsh. The metallic tang he could taste was never all too welcome, but he was grateful nonetheless. It was what woke him up, after all. Biting pain that jolted him into consciousness, freeing him from nightmares and their unwavering grip on his mind.

It was likely the prolonged time spent underground, but restlessness was a constant companion in his daily life by now, reducing his patience and tolerance for practically everything. It was better than the nightmares, than those dreaded but necessary periods of sleep, but it wasn't enjoyable, especially while a war was brewing. The frequent tactical meetings were a *chore*, wearing and seemingly never-ending, and it was all he could do to escape once Bella finally dismissed them after yet another day of zero progress.

“I don't even know why I have to be there,” he snapped at Hannibal after a particularly taxing day, hours locked in that room with voices reaching a crescendo around him. He was glad for the quiet solitude of Hannibal's compartment, the calm it brought. It didn't alleviate the tightness of his muscles or shake the memory of their piercing, raised voices, still ringing in his ears, but it let him breathe easier.

“It's just in case you know something,” Hannibal replied, moving over to him, tilting up his head with a knuckle. His face was gentle as he gazed at Will, a slight smile curling his lips. His finger was soft under Will's chin, barely touching his skin, feather-light. “Just in case you remember anything.”

“Like *what*?” he asked, jerking his head away. “I was locked in a *cell* for five months. I don't know or remember anything of use, and I *won't*. I'm not some great insight into Verger's soul and I'm not built for all of that… war stuff. I don't really understand it and I don't *want* to.”

“I know, Will, I know,” Hannibal was saying, and then leaning down to kiss him, his cheek, his jaw, his temple, nosing the side of his face with careful, attentive affection. “I've talked to them about it, but… They don't seem to care much about how any of this is affecting you.”

Will was trying not to squirm away, really, but all it did was leave him stiff and uncomfortable as the gentle touch Hannibal's lips grazed at the side of his head. It wasn't helping, and in fact it was only making him more tense, but a small modicum of sanity and empathy prevented him from bodily pushing Hannibal away. Instead he let his hands be taken into Hannibal's, allowed himself to be pulled toward the bed, where Hannibal sat in front of him. He could admit, he loved it when this happened, when Hannibal intentionally made himself lower than Will, submitted to Will, like prey exposing its neck. It made Will feel powerful, like he had some control, a privilege that he didn't have with matters concerning his life and his fate. To an extent, he suspected Hannibal understood this. Either that or he simply liked giving Will the power- Hannibal lived a life where he was expected to have

complete mastery over all that occurred to him, so maybe it was nice to surrender himself every once in a while. It didn't really matter. Whatever it was, it gave Will a heady rush of satisfaction, and it wasn't as if he'd ever have a full idea of what was going on inside Hannibal's head anyway. In many ways, he was still a mystery to Will, and it still ignited a flicker of passion in him that he now only felt rarely.

“Do you?”

“Do I *care*?” Hannibal questioned, incredulous. His expression was wide and surprised, almost childlike in its disbelief. “I care about you more than anything in the world,” he breathed, hands tight around Will's, open fondness spilling from his face, stars spreading into a darkening sky.

Will sighed, the stress falling from his body like air, deflating him. He climbed onto Hannibal, hearing his breath catch as Will bracketed his legs with his own, seating himself on Hannibal's thighs with a finite smile. The intensity of his gaze was almost too much weight to bear, sometimes, bursting with love that *glowed*, shone like it was glinting in the sun, in the stars, the moon. Devotion that was so bright it burned, flames licking around his heart, scorching his insides so pleasantly that he didn't think he would ever get enough. Even if it turned him to ashes, which it most likely would, he'd feel it all willingly. He *liked* it, was drawn to it by some irresistible, intoxicating force.

“I care about you too,” he whispered back, hand roaming up the planes of Hannibal's face, mapping its curves and lines and hollows. It trailed into Hannibal's hair, which hung loose across his forehead, and smoothed it back with a delicate fist. “We've been fighting.”

“I'm sorry about the other night,” Hannibal sighed, but it wasn't anything that Will hadn't heard before. “It was late and I was surprised and… well. Jealous, if I'm being honest.”

“I know. We've been over this. But it isn't just that,” Will confessed, feeling sorrow resting in his veins. After his conversation to Alana, he'd returned to Hannibal waiting in his compartment, where he'd apologised and kissed him full on the mouth, before Will could say anything at all. *Jealousy is a sick, dangerous emotion*, he'd said, and everything had been okay. For a little while.“It's everything. Over that, over the war, over… *breakfast*. It's *ridiculous* and I don't know how… I don't know how we can stop.”

“We will,” Hannibal assured, and the sincerity in his voice very nearly convinced Will. “We have to. It'll pass, I promise.”

“What good are promises in a world like this?”

“Just because the world is a wreck it doesn't mean we have to be,” he murmured, and Will could feel his breath fan over his lips, small wind. “Words still mean something. Promises still mean something.”

“And us? What do we mean?”

“Everything,” he said, “everything. We mean everything.”

The dry press of their mouths together was a fragile moment in time, the thin stem of a flower crushed between the pages of a book, a delicate thread being stretched at the seams. Strained forgiveness wavered between them, balanced on the point of a pin. It was a brief comfort to be at peace with one another again, but Will wasn't sure how long it would last. For all he knew, tomorrow they'd be screaming at each other about a matter as trivial as a meal. So for that, it wasn't much comfort at all.

And, oh, what empty words. That was all Hannibal was, wasn't it? Words. To Will, at least, it seemed as if all he could do lately was talk, spewing arguments and spitting apologies like poetry. Will used to adore him for it, but now it had him growing weary, falling on deaf ears that no longer listened attentively. They'd once been ready to hear, *waiting* to hear, really, but that was a different time. It wasn't as if they hadn't suffered during the Games, but at least things had made sense. Will had understood the world he was living in and had let himself tumble headfirst into Hannibal and a thousand fantasies about living free with him.

He'd never quite accounted for what they'd have to sacrifice for freedom, and the hardship that fighting for it would bring.

Peace was quickly souring in his throat as he pulled back from the short union their lips had, unable to look Hannibal in the eye. He felt that any speech falling from his tongue would be redundant, considering how he disagreed with Hannibal: words didn't mean a thing. Not anymore. They slipped into meaninglessness when he did, forced by Verger into an abyss of nothing, of blackened death, where however much he begged and pleaded for mercy, no kindness occurred. Why should anything be different now? Why should anything be different when coming from Hannibal?

“Will?” Hannibal asked, noticing his preoccupation. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he answered, and pushed their mouths together again, a mess of doubt weighing in his mind.

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Bird calls echoed throughout the forest, climbing the trees that towered over him in the dark, branches extending out like gnarled and wanting hands, scrabbling for purchase on his flimsy clothes. The fabric of them was so thin that the wind went right through them, shivering against his skin. They were the rags he'd worn in that cell, and the trees were ones he recognised from long ago, from a simpler time where there was nothing but uncomplicated savagery.

“You really are like nobody I've ever known,” came a breathy voice, and it was Hannibal.

He was younger, the high rise of his cheekbones less defined and much thinner in appearance, hair hanging limp past his ears. Will remembered, and he yearned. He missed this, this undefinable bond between them at the start, one that had so much potential and so much future.

Now, it sometimes felt as if they'd hit the end.

“Will,” Hannibal was saying in that ever-familiar way, and tendrils of hope curled in Will's stomach. The way Hannibal said his name: it had never changed. It sounded the same as it had two years ago, spoken in first greeting and whispered into the air of the arena, or now, said sultry in the heat of his bed or within a sad sorry, its shape on his tongue a plea for forgiveness.

His hand was on Will's cheek, then, and Will remembered that the first time he'd done that had been here, where their shared story really began. It may have been a common occurrence now, the warmth of Hannibal's palm easily recognised by the curve of his jaw, but here… he hadn't had any idea that it had meant *love*, hadn't even factored that into the heady mix of emotions he felt toward Hannibal. In reality, not that much time had passed since he had stood amongst these very trees, but it felt like an age. Being sixteen felt like a whole other era, seemed like such a young, raw age to be exposed to these atrocities. Then again, so was eighteen.

He'd been forced to mature so early, *too* early, and he no longer had any concept of what he *should* be, what other children his age would be.

When he looked up and into Hannibal's eyes, it wasn't him. Before him stood Molly, her hand pressed against the side of his face and her expression open and sorrowful. Guilt rose rapidly in him, a building wave, drowning his lungs from oxygen and making him feel sick to his stomach. What had occurred between them had been resolute and it had been peaceful, but that didn't distract from the sorrow of it all.

“I forgive you, Will,” she said, and of course she did, because even if she was simply a construct in his brain that's exactly what she *would* say. “Why won't you forgive yourself?”

“I...” His voice was stuck in his throat and he had to swallow, loosening his tongue. “You deserved better. I never should have touched you in the first place. I made you *want* me and then *lose* me, more than once. You watched me leave and you watched me die. I'm sorry.”

“I'm not real,” she laughed, “so there's no need for apologies. I don't know why it's *me* you're so guilty over- I am far from your greatest sin. We both know that.”

His greatest sin. A thousand names and a thousand faces flashed through his mind, blooded and beaten as they went, but in front of him was only Molly, eyes watery and lips curved in a sad smile, lily-white skin shining in the dark. Those people… he barely knew them. They were brief blips in his life, ones that he could forget for a little while. He had known Molly. He had hurt Molly.

“I hope you're okay,” he whispered. The knowledge that she was still alive in District 4 had been a relief, to say the least. Verger had spared her, an action that made Will more than grateful that he'd had the good sense to end things with her before he inevitably brought danger to her doorstep. He didn't want her down in Thirteen with the rest of them, cooped up like an animal, but then he also didn't want her out *there*, exposed and vulnerable to whatever war was about to occur.

“You aren't,” she said, turning from him, hand drifting with her and away from his face.

He followed her path throughout the forest, the sound of his feet cracking on twigs and shrubbery, a sound he had only heard in his dreams, recently. The scene around him was filled with memories that he resented and treasured all at once; it was hard to live with the fact that his worst nightmares and the place he met the love of his life were one and the same. The sunlight dappled through the trees eventually began to fade, the sky dimming in seemingly no time at all. Molly came to a stop where the trees parted to reveal the rocky edge of a cliff, and suddenly Will wasn't two years ago, he was one.

“You feel stifled,” she finally murmured, voice heavy in the silence and the twilight.

“Kind of.”

“Very,” she corrected, and who was Will to argue? She was his subconscious, after all. “You need to be free. As free as you can.”

“I can't leave him.”

“You won't. You'll still be there. It just won't be *all* the time, and it won't be with any requirements.”

“He doesn't *require* me to do anything,” he spat, almost offended at the implication.

“Expectations, then,” she amended, and before he could protest any further she shot a glare at him, which looked stiff and ridiculous on her face, a face that was so often set in a smile made of sunshine and serenity. “What you have… it's becoming unhealthy.”

“It's always been unhealthy,” he argued.

“You need space,” she said, quiet. He moved over to her, step by step, slow as he went. He watched the stones shift from under his feet, feeling the sting on his bare soles. “You need time. You need freedom.”

“I have all of those things.”

“Do you?”

When he glanced up, it was no longer Molly. Hannibal was there, eyes dark and endless, staring right into his soul- if he still had one, that was. Perhaps there were some things that couldn't be forgotten, that couldn't be forgiven. There was a reason he couldn't decide on his greatest sin: there were so damn many of them it was hard to consider which was *worst*. Mind racing, Will stepped forward into his waiting arms and they tipped off the bluff together, wind whirling around them as they hurtled into nothingness, into everything, into a paradise where thoughts like these no longer bothered him, leaving his brain blank and empty. Into a fiery and abrupt end.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Will?”

Waking in Hannibal's arms was common occurrence, but today it felt different. Poisoned by the painful resonance of his dream- nightmare?- and the weight it held, sinking in his gut like a body in the sea. Like usual, their hands were joined under the covers and their legs were tangled together, heat pressed between them. Hannibal's eyes were trained dutifully on him, watching as he shifted to wakefulness, bright and loving like the rising sun. It was always like this. Always soft and crisp, like the moment was everlasting, pressed into the seams of time forever more. Today, it was harder than ever to revel in the peace, his awakening glow disturbed by creeping guilt and worry.

“Hannibal,” he sighed, and saw as it drew a smile from Hannibal's lips, helpless and unrestrained in the morning dim. Will missed when they'd do this outside, curled together in a single sleeping bag and woken by the natural light rather than the artificial lack of it down here. Will missed a lot of things, these days. In all, he wished for a simpler time, a previous time, where everything was fresh and new and there was still so much more to discover, where betrayal lasted a day, not a year.

“Morning,” Hannibal murmured in reply, husky with sleep and faint want. It made Will's heart break, stinging in his chest, but he soldiered through it, teeth gritted and breath held in his lungs like a caged bird, fluttering against its restraints.

“Can I talk to you about something?”

Hannibal's brow twitched in a puzzled, musing manner, but he still smiled in reassurance, hand squeezing around Will's.

“Anything.”

“I don't think we can do this anymore,” Will said, and the world split in two.

His words registered on Hannibal's face sluggishly in the early haze settled in his eyes, a slow-working poison, beginning with unfiltered confusion and followed quickly by desperate disbelief. And then, the worst. Heavy and heartbreaking understanding, shaped by nothing but immense agony, like nothing he'd seen on Hannibal before, intimate and intricate in its severity.

“Why?” was all he asked, voice shaking like sails in a storm, timid as it drifted into the small space between them that now felt like an endless gulf. He did not feign ignorance like many would. Hannibal was intelligent, and there was no use pretending that he didn't know what 'this' was referring to. He knew Will would've seen it for the false and desperate attempt at prolonging the inevitable it was.

“We need to be apart. We need to learn how to live without each other,” Will justified, the words hard to find and the meaning behind them lost, drowning in the rush of unwanted pity and regret coursing throughout his brain. “This doesn't mean we don't see each other anymore, it's just without… this,” he muttered, indicating to their position in bed with one another, sheepish.

Hannibal still looked utterly devastated, expression flickering between pain and bewilderment. His frown had deepened, now a groove in his forehead, the sadness etched onto his face, bloodied ink. It made Will's remorse all the more palpable, resting at the back of his throat as Hannibal fumbled for words in front of him.

“I love you?”

It was a question, a cluster of them, questions that weren't quite asked, ones that went unspoken but not misunderstood. *Isn't that enough? Aren't I enough? Did you ever even love me to begin with?*

What now?

“I love you too,” Will admitted, and he hoped the intensity in his voice was enough to convince Hannibal and save him from hurting all the more, “but I need this. I need to be without you. Please respect that.”

Finally breaking whatever ridiculous hold that had them still facing each other under the blanket, Hannibal glanced away from Will, pushing himself up to sit, hands trembling as he did. He was staring at the door across the room in vague shock, mouth parted and fists clenching and unclenching on the blanket, knuckles white. Will felt himself crumbling just watching it, watching this great monster fall at his feet with only a few words to pierce his ever-thick skin, cruel and calculating in their attack. Having this power had been exciting before, when he wanted it. It had been used so often to thrill Hannibal, to spread that numb surprise over his face that indicated he was experiencing an especially powerful wave of emotion for Will, but it had never been intended to hurt. Yet here it was, causing as much damage as it did glory.

“Of course,” Hannibal rasped, and Will could see him furiously attempting to shut off those raw emotions that he only really let Will witness, jaw tight and chest heaving with the effort of it all, but his voice was quiet and eyelashes wet. He looked smaller than Will had ever seen him, hunched on the bed like a wounded animal, curling into himself for protection. “I think you should leave.”

“Hannibal-”

“Please,” he whispered fervently, fixing his eyes on Will again. They were wide and shiny, and Will felt his gut tug at the sight of them. “*Please*. If we're going to respect each other's wishes here, I need you to *leave*.”

Sorrow clutching him like the frosted hands of winter, he nodded stiffly, extricating himself from the bed and rising to his feet. Hannibal's eyes followed him as he gathered up his clothes, stepping into his pants and pulling on his shirt as quickly as possible. Tension hung

in the air, tangible, thick like smoke. It was choking him as he moved, as a pair of sad eyes tracked his movements, as his heart slowly split in cracks below his ribs. When he eventually looked back to Hannibal, his knees were hugged against his chest, arms clinging around them like they were his only anchor throughout this all. It was a position so *innocent*, so *young*, so unlike Hannibal. Will felt tears brim in his eyes, and let teeth pierce his bottom lip sharply, desperately seeking some other pain, some seizing distraction. It was all he could do not to break right there and then.

“I really am sorry, Hannibal,” he confessed, hoarse, voice scratching his throat. He was stood there by the door, feet bare on the cold polish of the floor and arms bare to the chill of morning and misery, jacket and shoes haphazardly piled into his arms, hopelessly searching for some kind of marred and aching forgiveness.

Hannibal said nothing, just gazed at him with those big, dark eyes, and took a great, shivering breath. There was so much to say, but Will could articulate none of it, so instead he turned and shifted the door opening with a sickening, finite creak. One last look: caramel hair, honey skin, chocolate eyes. A sweet surface with nothing but bitter brutality waiting underneath, a parasite in hiding that only Will had tasted, had been *allowed* to taste. He could almost see the guards that he had so carefully worn down fly back up again, shuttering quickly and standing even stronger than before. It would perhaps take a miracle to drag them down again.

Although he had thought that in the first place, and look at where they were now: Will causing destruction with eight simple words, bringing a murderous beast to tears with the prospect of separation.

The door had barely clicked shut behind him before he collapsed against it, soundless sobs forcing themselves from his chest with force that made him *ache*, igniting nausea in his bones, setting hollow agony aflame in his flesh. Hannibal's face, his *eyes*… the thought of them would haunt him for a while, he knew, because his brain *did* this. It took these horrors in his life and constructed them into constant terrors that stalked him into his dreams, warping and twisting until he was waking with sweat plastering his body and water spilling from his tired eyes. The nightmares this would bring him… that would all come in time. For now, he silently wept like a distraught child on the floor of the corridor, too gripped by his personal pain to care if anybody came across him, bare and exposed in the open, heart flayed and displayed for all to see.

The tears falling from his eyes felt like blood, salty, stinging, and he couldn't decide which was worse. He couldn't work out if this hurt *more*, somehow, more than those months strapped to a table enduring beatings and lashings that almost became tolerable over time. But this. It was like a hole cut clean through his chest, and he was overspilling with all of it, all the wonder and devotion and betrayal he'd lived through at Hannibal's hand. Did it mean anything now? Was it all just pointless?

Loving Hannibal was what had led him here, really. Trusting Hannibal, at least. Without him, he would've died in that arena, that very first one. It felt like an entirely different era, now; another boy had entered those Games, because Will scarcely recognised him anymore. He was a different person now and it was because of *Hannibal* and he had just *thrown all of that away.*

It would be easy to just re-enter the compartment, he supposed. Lean over the bed and grasp Hannibal's chin, and kiss him, *kiss* him, kiss him like nothing else mattered. He'd be forgiven in an instant, he suspected, while it was still all so fresh. He *could* do it, could just gather up enough bravery to do so. Picking himself up, tears dried on his cheeks, his head swam as he found his footing.

He could.

But he didn't.

Will walked away from Hannibal and into uncertainty.

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Head cushioned on Bev's stomach, toes pushing at Georgia's thigh and hands playing with the hem of Peter's shirt, the tears were falling with less consistency. Hurt was still settled in his chest, but now it was just numb, rather than the bright and violent urgency that had been flowing from it before. Will supposed that learning to live with pain was simply how he coped- it was the only reason he really survived being under Verger's blade, he thought. He could've given up a lot earlier. He'd *wanted* to. Looking back, he feared that if he had, he would've perished long before anybody could save him.

“You two have always been… intense,” Bev was muttering, hands folding through his hair, an easy touch that softened his distress. “So I'm surprised this didn't go more dramatically, if I'm being honest. But you can't tell me you didn't expect it would *hurt*.”

“Not like *this*,” he replied thickly. “I guess for the longest time I thought that something like this would never really happen. That we were forever, you know?”

“Maybe you still are,” Georgia suggested, and shot him a defensive look when he leaned up to glare at her. “Come on, Will. Relationships have rough spots. People break up and get back together. Maybe time away from him will show you just how much you really need him.”

“This really isn't what I want to hear right now,” he mumbled, but was too buried in sorrow to feel the irritation. “It's just… it's a *lot*.”

“It always *was* with Hannibal,” Bev pointed out. “I think it's for the best, really. Whether it's only for a little while or forever. You've been through so much, Will, and you just...” Her voice had grown soft, and she trailed off with a sigh, hand still sifting through his curls, dancing amongst them absentmindedly. “You deserve to be happy. You deserve to be alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“After everything that happened to you… there,” she began explaining, “I think it probably wasn't for the best that you came back to something that's so… so *much*. So *overwhelming*.”

“Why is it that opinions like this always come out *after* everything's fallen apart?”

“What was I supposed to say to you, before? 'End things with him, you *might* need some space?'” she questioned, the rhetorical sarcasm dripping hotly from her tone. “You'd just

found him again, Will. The relief of it all… You needed him, then. You needed all of us. But now you're healing and… it's not unhealthy to want distance, you know?"

"I *don't*," he groaned, hands coming up to hide his face as he moaned in helpless confusion. "I don't know *what* I want," he spoke into his hands, muffled, before dragging them away again. "Everything is so fuzzy and nothing makes *sense*, and I broke up with Hannibal because I couldn't stand the arguing and I was *suffocating*, I…"

"It's okay-"

"It's not," he snapped. "It's not okay, because I hurt him. I *broke his heart* because I need to *find myself* or whatever else. He'll never forgive me."

Nobody said a thing- they all knew how untrue it was. Hannibal would forgive Will as soon as he asked, it was just that... taking him back? That was another story. Still, silence lay between them all, awkward and oppressive as everybody refrained from breathing, quietened by whatever invisible force had taken their words in the first place.

"It- It's okay to be selfish," Peter finally interjected, hesitant voice a comfort amidst the sure and contradicting voices of the girls. "That's what my m-mom always told m-me."

Will sat, shifting away from Bev's softly moving hands and feeling the blood rush to his head as he positioned himself to see Peter, timidly sitting stooped on the floor, and nervously anticipating his response. His hands fiddled with one another, thumbs running rings around each other and fingers fluttering in the air, in tune to some frequency that nobody else could feel.

"Am I being selfish?"

"I don't… I don't think s-so," Peter admitted, gaze focused on the ground. "B-but *you* do."

"You don't think I'm selfish?" Will asked, and his voice must've been more vulnerable than he'd wanted because it even made *Peter* look up at him in sad surprise, compassion filling his eyes. And in typical Peter fashion, he simply radiated sincerity. It came off him in waves, stilling Will's racing mind, asking questions a hundred a second.

"*No*," Peter answered earnestly, and Will very nearly shrunk under the kindness of it. "It- You're… You're still thinking a-about what h-he's feeling. That's not s-selfish."

To prevent a surge of gratitude too strong, he had to bite his tongue and focus on the sting of it, the metallic tang in his mouth as his teeth pushed forward. He had tasted blood far too much in his short span of life, knew it's flavour and texture and hue better than most people his age, and was all too aware of how it danced below his skin at all times, journeying throughout his veins, red rivers and lakes pooling inside him.

He reached out and seize Peter's hand, gripping on tightly. It felt as if he'd been doing that a lot lately, but really, who could blame him? He desperately needed it, the support, the companionship, the anchor of another person's hand in his.

It was all he could do to stop the storm from swallowing him whole, to stop himself from coming to the same great and tragic end that his father had, out there rotting in sea-salt and sand with only Garret Jacob Hobbs for company.

Chapter End Notes

i am SO sorry. this isn't the end of the hannigram, I promise!

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How have you been recently?”

“Do you need to ask?” Will sneered, not looking her in the eye and instead focused on the shine of her shoes. “He hasn't told you already?”

“What Hannibal has or hasn't told me is of no consequence,” Bedelia answered. “What matters is what you want to talk about. It doesn't have to be that.”

“What else is there to talk about? How I've had the same thing for dinner for the past five days? How I haven't seen the sun in nearly a year?”

“You were freed from Verger's mansion, but… you don't feel free,” she observed, and he could only huff in response, the frustration of it all almost too much to bear.

“No shit.”

She tilted her head at his profanity, considering. All he could do was sit there stewing in his own resentment, silently fuming and holding back his words. It wasn't her fault, which he knew, logically. But sometimes it was like he couldn't breathe, locked down here with hundreds of people he didn't know, forced to go about his daily life while his home moved on a million miles away. Molly, his dogs, the fisherman from the river. The life that he had built around himself as he'd grown- all of it, gone. This was all there was now. For him, at least. To say it drove him mad would be a severe understatement.

“Why?” she asked, and he frowned.

“Why don't I feel free?” he clarified, and she nodded expectantly. His brain came to a sudden and screeching halt. Besides the obvious 'trapped underground' element of it all, why *didn't* he feel free? It was better than Verger's cell, sure, but without the pain that had accompanied him there, he felt almost as restless down here these days. “I mean. Underground, for starters. But… I don't enjoy being forced into their meetings. I don't like being told what I can and can't do at all hours of the day. I miss the sea and the sky and *fresh air*. It feels like I can't ever be alone anymore.”

“Do you think that contributed to your problems with Hannibal?”

“It probably *started* them,” he muttered. “Don't get me wrong, we can do close quarters. We spent weeks on end in the Games with no escape from one another, but this… it's been months, now. Much more than I'm equipped to handle.”

“You think Hannibal was equipped to handle it?”

“Hannibal's equipped to handle everything,” he declared, before sighing, considering it more seriously. “I don't know. Maybe. I feel like even if he did need the space he'd never ask for it- the good days are enough for him, I think.”

“But not enough for you?”

“Hannibal's a lot more… *intense* than I am. Everything is so current. His emotions change like the tide,” he whispered, imagining crashing waves and the endless, wanting abyss. *Falling was like drowning*, he thought, *giving yourself over to the whims of nature and letting your body be dragged under, consumed, embraced*. “The now is all that matters. If we have a bad day it's just that: a bad day. Not another shitty argument, like it is for me.”

“I wouldn't say you *aren't* intense,” Bedelia remarked, and Will raised his eyebrows. He supposed his perception of himself would never be entirely accurate. “Just in a different way, perhaps. You both communicate in the same ways: violence and sex.”

“Sex?”

“I don't presume to know the intricacies of your physical relationship to one another,” she dismissed, and Will felt a blush threatening to creep up his neck. Their one real attempt at a *physical* relationship had failed quite terribly, if he remembered correctly. “But the way he looks at you… and you at him, I suppose… it's primal. Something from deep within, ignited by some ancient instinct. Love is but a chemical reaction, really. What you have with each other isn't emotional in nature. Not from my view.”

“It's more than physical,” Will argued, though not with much force in his voice. “Whether love is chemical or not… our connection is… transcendent, if I'm honest. Beyond definition.”

“If so, why the need for space?”

Shutting his eyes, his chin dropped to his chest, rising and falling with steady, sorrowful breaths. Their connection had not disappeared the other day, had only weakened. But Will had feared, deeply, awfully, what would've happened to it while trapped with one another, words dancing in circles around each other, ripping whatever they had apart, piece by piece. Perhaps he was deluding himself, but he had ended things to save them. Not himself, not Hannibal, but *them*. They would always be conjoined, and neither would survive separation, which was the danger if they stayed wrapped together, self-destructing as they went.

“Maybe even Gods need time to breathe,” he answered quietly. “Ours clearly needed so much of it that he never came back.”

“Do you believe he exists?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “But if he does, I'm pretty sure he hates us.”

“You liken yourself to him,” she commented, looking more fascinated with each word he spoke. If she was like this with *him*, plain old Will, who may or may not have a proclivity for murder, he could scarcely imagine how she had conversations with *Hannibal*.

“I wouldn't say that. If anybody's a God, it isn't *me*. I think I have the least control over my life than anyone I've ever met,” he said, finding an ounce of dry humour in the statement and ignoring the dull ache it left in his stomach. “I just think it's more important we preserve what we have, rather than ruin it by confining ourselves to one form of relationship.”

“Transcendence can be suffocating.”

Bedelia had, quite honestly, hit the nail on the head, and it was likely clear to her from the way he stopped and inhaled shakily, relieved and a little sad. Yes, it stung that he and Hannibal would no longer have that easy closeness that came with the weight of romantic affection, but what they'd *had*, before all of that… It had still mattered. It certainly wasn't as unsustainable as a relationship.

“You have no idea,” he finally replied, wry and defeated, and watched as she smiled in response, equal mix of pity and intrigue. Will supposed having front row seats to perhaps the most dysfunctional relationship she'd witnessed to date was fairly interesting. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious about how they seemed from an outside perspective.

“When all of this is over...” she began, and at his sharp look, she amended herself, eyes shrewd and calculating as she scanned him, brain likely darting through a thousand explanations for every breath he took, every word that slipped from his tongue. “*If* all of this ends… Do you think there's any possibility of salvaging you and Hannibal?”

“If this really does end,” he started, contemplating it, “and if we both survive… there'll be a lot more of a chance than there would be if we'd stayed together. If by some miracle, we have a future, then… yes, I'd like to spend it with him. Always him.”

“And if he doesn't want to spend it with you?”

The idea of that was… disturbing. Terrifying. Because while Hannibal could usually be easily manoeuvred when it came to Will, there was every chance that while Will thought this was the best path for them, it had distanced Hannibal dangerously from him. Perhaps they would never pick up the pieces again. The thought was real, *too* real, too possible for him to handle.

Swallowing the bile back, he breathed deep and looked her in the eye.

“Then I spend it with regret.”

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Despite living with a black hole of melancholy for the past few days, the fury as Bella addressed them seemed to overpower it in an instant, a heady rush that had him clenching his fists so hard he knew his fingernails would leave grooves behind, crescent arcs on the tender flesh of his palm.

“We take District Twelve in less than a week- if our calculations are correct, it should only take a few days to walk there,” she was saying, voice sinking into the room, heavy on Will's bones as his mind skipped over the implications. “So we leave as soon as possible, really. Are there any volunteers for the team?”

Will couldn't stop thinking about his hand in all this. His opinion had been, quite strongly, that the Districts needed to be on board before any action was taken against Verger and the Capitol. So it had resulted in this. Practically taking a District hostage, like they were no better than Peacekeepers, forcing innocent and naive people into their fight. What would they do with those that refused to partake? It was a question he was far too afraid to ask.

He watched, burning with rage and betrayal as Hannibal stepped forward to stand by Pazzi and Sogliato, two guarantees on the mission. Bev was hovering behind them reluctantly, their unwilling propaganda tool. Her eyes met his over Sogliato's shoulder, wide and full with dismay. First it was Hannibal, and then Chiyoh, by Jack, and then the crowd began to thin as more joined the others in preparation for war. This was really where it began, brewing beneath the dirt and the mud, pioneered by those willing to sink to Verger's level just to win.

“Will,” it was Chiyoh, in front of him, and there was enough movement in the room that it was inconspicuous, private. “You should join us.”

“I don't agree with what you're doing.”

“All the more reason to come, don't you think? Keep us in line?”

“There's a little too many of you for me to command,” he muttered, snide, and she shook her head in exasperation.

“I'm not saying *command*, although I do think you're capable-” at this, he balked, blood draining from his face as he looked up at her in horror, but she simply smirked and continued with her sentence, “-but the least you could do is *oversee*. At least you can *try* to have *some* control over what's happening here, instead of watching from Thirteen and hating it all.”

Control. It was what he longed for, really, and she had hit the right spot with that word. He *hated* this, but that was all he'd needed for quite a while now, deprived of it during his time locked in either a gloomy cell or a stark underground bunker. Looking at her, the hopeful riches of her eyes, the way a strand of her inky hair hung in front of the delicate features of her face, a thread of seaweed lost in the ocean. It was impossible to deny her, especially when her soft stoicism reminded him so suddenly of Hannibal, who was eyeing them from the other side of the room.

“Okay. I'll come,” he reluctantly acquiesced, watching as the smug victory curved her mouth into a smirk. “But don't expect me to follow orders.”

“Giving out orders isn't my job. It's *theirs*,” she said, throwing an exasperated glance in the direction of Pazzi and Sogliato. “Trust me, I believe it'll do them some good to face a little non-compliance.”

The shock in Hannibal's face as Will moved to follow Chiyoh over to the rest of them was a satisfying rush, tinted in triumph. A surprised Hannibal was a rare, exciting thing, a guarded emotion in him that could only really be coaxed out by Will. That power he had, this burgeoning control, seeping into his body like the warmth of a fire amidst a cold winter… it was the best thing he'd felt in a while.

Things hadn't been easy, since he and Hannibal had fallen apart.

It had only been a few days but it felt like a lifetime, and every time they looked at each other it felt like mere minutes, the pain exploding in him, fresh and new all over again. Everything between them was tense and aching and Will hated it, but there was at least a chance that it would improve now, slowly, creeping, but eventual. They hadn't spoken at all, had shared nothing but stolen glances and awkward run-ins with one another, and Will's only contact besides that had been through his dreams. Hannibal would kiss him and the war would end and the open sea of forever would await him.

The reality was, in fact, that he was living a nightmare.

“You don't hurt civilians,” Bella was ordering firmly, eyes resting a little too long on Sogliato. “This is for them. We need to protect them.”

A flurry of agreement flew through the group, and Will could feel an ominous stone in the pit of his stomach, sinking, sinking down. When did anything ever go right in this world? When had anything ever been fair?

The trek up to the top floor was a hectic one, too many pairs of feet pushing up the stairs, pushing Will dangerously close to Hannibal's steadily marching form, faltering only when he likely caught Will's scent or some equally ridiculous indication that he was nearby. There was distraction enough, however, by the time they finally reached the very peak of Thirteen, a room that was small and square, its only feature being a door engraved upon the ceiling, handle only reachable by hook. People rarely came up here, unless in situations like this. Because above them was the outside.

Above them was the whole world.

Alight anticipation was building in him at the thought of it, breathless and singing. In his better dreams, the wide open space of the earth heavily starred, an expectant mistress. He was from District 4: he'd been raised alongside the water and the earth, had been allowed to roam free and wild since as soon as he could walk. He had been confined below the ground for far too long, even if it was for his own good. He needed to feel the dirt and mud between his toes, or better yet: the sea. Cold and blue and everything he saw in Abigail's eyes, her father's eyes, his destruction and salvation.

The door swung open suddenly after a few tugs, the pull of gravity stronger than any rust accumulated on its hinges. Will peered over the tops of people's heads as daylight spilled into the room like white wine, a bitter reunion, a contrast to the red richness of his life down here. People started to climb, pushing themselves through the open window of the ceiling into the liberating serenity of the outside. Somehow, because the universe had a permanent grudge against Will, Hannibal ended up going just before him, shifting into illumination like the great celestial being that he was, the light of the sun making his features shine pleasantly. Will could taste it now, the wind in the air, the flowers above them, the earthy zest of nature. Hannibal, ever the gentleman, extended a hand for him, glowing golden in the afternoon sun. When Will grabbed it, it was solid. It was real and steady, pulling him up, refusing to let go.

“Freedom at last,” Hannibal said, the first words exchanged between them in days, as Will climbed to his feet.

The wind ruffled through his hair, and Hannibal's eyes caught on it, before being dragged back to his face with that inescapable magnetism that seemed to control him so dreadfully. His eyes were lost, smitten, and he beamed at Will in the brightness of the outdoors.

“You think this is freedom?” Will asked. “Being outside? It's more than a place. Freedom is… a forest fire. It ravages and it burns and it doesn't leave anything behind. It rips authority out from the roots. It doesn't tiptoe around a war like we are now.”

“You've changed your mind,” Hannibal remarked. “I thought you believed waiting would be best.”

“Yeah, well. My patience is running out,” he said, tired, looking to the ground, watching the blades of grass shake in the wind.

“I love you,” Hannibal replied, voice thick with adoration, full and tremulous. Will's head shot up to stare in surprise, and Hannibal appeared to be helpless against the tide of words on his tongue, awe creasing his expression. “I don't understand you at all. But oh, how I love you.”

Will was at a loss for what to say, speechless as he gazed into the void of Hannibal's black eyes, glinting in some vague colour between caramel and obsidian in the light. Some live wire attached to Will's heart was jumping with static and electricity, melting through the insulation of guilt and distance that he had tried to build around it. Hannibal probably knew *exactly* why Will had done what he'd done, but he *didn't care*. He was still willing to lay himself bare and vulnerable out here in the open, expose himself so dangerously to Will, rip out his heart with blunt nails and present it dutifully, ardently, hopelessly, blood dripping from his fingers and palms like holy water, soaking him in his own sin and want.

“I-”

“Right,” Pazzi interrupted conveniently, just as Will had finally worked up the nerve to say something, *anything.* The words were burning and trembling in his throat, tasting like alcohol he'd thrown down carelessly, wanting. “We'll be there in four days, if I'm correct. We can go over the plan on the way there. Grab one of the packs we threw up earlier and then we can get going.”

Excitement was thick in the air as the group surged forward, it smelt of sweat and flowers, it smelt of Hannibal, so close, facing him, radiating and shivering with sick desire. Regret was written on his face as more time passed with no reply from Will, and he saw it building on his tongue. But that wasn't what Will wanted. He didn't want any apologies.

Pushing onto the balls of his feet, he leant into Hannibal's space, and the air thinned between them precariously, pulling the moment tight. Will pressed his lips to Hannibal's cheek, soft as a whisper, and revelled in the sound of breath hitching dangerously.

And so, their journey throughout the wilderness of Panem began.

Chapter End Notes

if you need any clarification about the rebellion plotline don't hesitate to ask! i've been juggling it with it all the romance drama and i understand if it comes across as really convoluted

Chapter 21

Rain, Will was sure, had never felt so good. It was cold upon his skin, flattening his hair in an unflattering fashion and making his clothes stick to him, but the raw forces of nature were a refreshing change from the dark, underground isolation he'd been living in for the better part of a year. He wanted desperately to kick off his shoes, feel the mud sink around the bare soles of his feet, wet and real, a lost relic from the rainy days of his childhood. Tilting his head up to the sky and parting his mouth, raindrops splattered upon his skin, leaving a tasteless greeting upon his tongue. The damp impressions upon his skin, the stormy grey of the clouds, it was heaven, it was freedom.

“It reminds me of home,” Bev said on the first day, and Will only smiled serenely in response, beads of water caught in his eyelashes, blurring her in his vision, crouched before him.

“It reminds me of the arena,” she said on the second day, when the soft patter of rain grew into a howling storm, screaming and straining in agony above them. His only reply was to take her hand in his, intertwining them.

“What does it remind you of?” he asked on the third day, sun finally peeking from behind the lightening clouds, looking to her expectantly, where she was squinting at the bright sky, hand fanned over her forehead for shade.

“The future,” she said, low and quiet, and when she met his eyes his love swung deep inside him, arcing and swooping painfully, leaving him sore and hopeful.

“You think we'll be so lucky?”

“Maybe that's what death is like,” she suggested carelessly, eyes falling back to the ground, the disappearing damp of the grass.

“I just assumed it'd be dark,” he admitted, allowing only a little consideration for the concept of a death with golden sunlight, where pleasant warmth would drag him into content peace, instead of his lasting idea of eternal nothingness.

“Darkness isn't all bad,” she whispered, and with nothing but the sound of steady trudging to accompany their conversation, he was glad for the hush of her voice. Nobody seemed to want to talk to one another, leaving nothing but an uneasy silence to walk along to. It made Will hyperaware whenever he said a word, filled with protective concern for the privacy of the intimacy of he and Bev's soft exchanges.

She wasn't entirely wrong. Darkness was where he'd found Hannibal, after all, underneath an artificial starry sky, through whispered dialogue as they'd explored the depths of each other's minds, grasped by freeing and helpless curiosity. Darkness had followed them from that arena, surrounding them in dim bedrooms, wrapped around one another for comfort, Hannibal's solid form Will's only tether to the material world while dreams tempted him

away. Dark as the night, they had kissed and met in the light of the moon, and oh, how Will longed for those simpler times now.

Because now darkness was blood, his own, inky rich and spilling, overflowing wine from the glass of his lifeforce. It was the cold and unforgiving bars of a cell, caging him in with nothing but his own faltering hope and increasingly sorrowful dreams, candlewax dripping hot like stardust in the dusty corners of his new home.

“I'm tired of the dark,” he finally murmured. When all of this was over, if he came out of it the other side in enough pieces to gather himself up again… he wanted to emerge into the light, a place he had never quite lived. The world would be different, soon. It would be rebuilding from chaos and reshaping into something completely different.

Perhaps Will could do the same.

His legs were aching now, had been for a day or so, not used to so much activity for a fair while, but he didn't mind it so much. At least the pain was *something*, something real and *his*, that long-lost control all over again. Losing his mother had been an agony ripped from his chest that he hadn't been able to quell, but this. It was tangible. If he slowed down it would lessen, cool relief, and if he sped up it would strain, muscles feeling as if they were bursting at the seams, held together by nothing more than his skin, thin as paper. This reign over his body was everything he needed, really, and he'd have to thank Chiyoh for this: the gift of normalcy. There hadn't been space in Thirteen to exercise like this unless he'd given into any desire to train, but the feeling of shortening breath in his lungs and sweat accumulating on his forehead was as good a medicine as any, clearing his mind from any obsessive concerns, whether they be about Hannibal or death or both.

When they eventually stopped for rest later the night, the sun beginning to sink below the horizon and sending streaks of pink throughout the sky like a paint-tinted canvas, Will was almost disappointed. He'd wanted to feel the burn in his calves all night, feel the protest of his over-worked legs spread exhaustion throughout his body. It was a familiar feeling, one from years back, when his journey throughout a seemingly endless arena had been his only objective.

“We'll arrive tomorrow,” Chiyoh informed him, Bev and Georgia as she approached them, handing them bowls of the heated up beans from the fire. Will was surprised she'd joined them instead of Hannibal, who sat almost directly opposite, ignoring Gideon and looking distastefully down at his meal. But then Chiyoh was always one for surprises, much like Hannibal himself..

“And what then?” Georgia asked, and Will saw the struggle on her face as she tried not to react to Chiyoh's answering smirk as she perched on a tree stump beside them.

“We surround the District,” she replied loftily, gaze fixed on Pazzi, where his eyes were boring into the embers of the fire, flickering flames that glowed orange in the night. “Gather them. Explain. Then… we ask.”

“Ask?”

“If they'll join us.”

“And if they won't?” Will questioned, dread sizzling low in his abdomen at the thought of the answer. To his surprise, however, Chiyoh was frowning at him as though he'd asked the most ridiculous question imaginable, peering at him in confusion.

“Then they don't?” she clarified, phrase turning up at the end in the lilt of a question. “Am I misunderstanding what you're asking?”

Will tried to make sense of it in his mind. It was, of course, the right way to go about it, with kind reservation that was there only to liberate the people of the Districts from Verger's unwavering hold on their lives. But he'd assumed… he'd thought taking the Districts had meant *trapping* them. Pushing them to fight, to rage against the Capitol by the side of Thirteen but to do so without choice, without any will of their own.

“We just… leave them?”

“Well I suppose we'll offer them refuge in Thirteen, just in case the Capitol retaliate against the Districts. But nobody's being forced into anything, Will.”

Retaliate. It was a nice word for destroy, really. Grass had grown over Thirteen, had sprouted bright wildflowers and reaching weeds, new life growing over a graveyard. But Will had seen the footage; they all had. It was shown in almost every propaganda video. That familiar wasteland, the charred remains of District 13, the ruins of what had been a home to thousands. Those people had been alive and well, of course, safe below the ground, but there had still been destruction. And this time, that destruction would result in casualties. No deals would be struck in this war. Not this time. Whatever would happen in the coming months, it would be the end. Of what, Will wasn't sure, none of them were- it would be the end of the Capitol or the end of them. And if it was them, the Districts would have to pay for the rebellion, most likely in blood. That was the way of the Capitol.

The thought of the Districts being protected from this, however, no matter the outcome… it was an instant soothe. They would be allowed agency of their own, something he knew firsthand was strongly desired when confined to the monotony and expectation of a life answering to the Capitol.

“I seem to recall a conversation between us only a few days ago,” he finally responded, a wave of utter relief encompassing him, heady, exhilarating, “you forced me here.”

“I'm persuasive, I admit. But I have no power over you, or anybody, for that matter. Perhaps you should take some responsibility for your own actions,” she professed, amusement glinting in her eyes, and Will found himself grinning back. Chiyoh's humour, when it made its rare appearance, was subtle, a far cry from the raucous laughter that Bev could elicit from him and the soft giggles Hannibal could coax, whispered into nocturnal air.

Bev interjected then, words spoken in soft tones, enquiring more from Chiyoh, who seemed to a be a pool of knowledge today. But Will wasn't listening. His eyes had been inevitably drawn to Hannibal, hazy through the smoke of the fire, the air appearing to ripple around him. Smoulder was alight in his stomach at the heat of it all, emanating from the fire and

burning within him. If they were still together… Will could imagine it. Dragging him away, into the privacy of the thickening forest, and letting himself be taken against a tree, ragged breaths panted against his neck and the feeling of teeth sinking down on the tender skin of his shoulder. Or even, depending on Hannibal's preferences, the other way around.

Hannibal met his eyes, blacker than the sky above them, wanton like the very fire that separated them, and Will knew he should dismiss his desires, store them away for later, for a time with privacy and peace. But he knew they were shared, to an extent. Maybe not identical, but similar. He could see it in Hannibal, the way he shifted and stared at Will, hands twitching around his bowl as if they should be touching something else, *someone* else. Hannibal may have been a mystery sometimes, but emotions like this, emotions like want… they were easy to read on anyone. And Hannibal had always been obvious when it concerned Will, besotted and soft and yearning, arching below him and straining toward him, wanting, searching, seeking.

“Will?” His trance was broken by the husk of Georgia's voice, snapping into the silence that he'd surrounded himself in. In reality, Bev and Chiyoh were still speaking, hushed but steady, and the sounds of the camp crackled on, the burn of logs and the crunch of twigs.

“Yeah?” His voice came out lower than expected, deep and preoccupied with the unexpected rise of his fantasies. Hannibal was still gazing at him, tongue peeking out to trace his own lips. Will watched it, transfixed, and heard a quiet exhale of laughter beside him.

“Have you two spoken?” she asked, and when he turned to her, finally dragging his eyes from Hannibal, she looked torn between amusement and pity. Will sighed, and she smiled, her hand coming to rest on his arm. “You're pretty obvious.”

“We've… shared words,” he settled on, thinking only of *I love you,* the sun glaring above them and the world spinning, unchanged, below their feet. “But not much, really. I need to try… I should stop fixating,” he muttered, realising that he'd barely thought of anything other then Hannibal since they'd parted. “It's the reason I got out, after all.”

“Sorry,” she whispered, with a sheepish quirk to her mouth, and he huffed it away, dismissive. “I suppose I thought it'd be a better topic than tomorrow.”

“I'm sure it'll go fine, unless…”

“Unless he knows.”

“You think he does?”

“Who can possibly guess, when it comes to that man? Verger's got more power than we can comprehend,” Georgia uttered, and Will could scarcely imagine what he'd put her through. She'd won years before they had. That left years for Verger to focus on her, to threaten and terrorise and do all manner of things to make her surrender to him, comply to become another prop to show off to the Capitol.

A darker thought reminded him of how similar she looked to Margot, hair the colour of straw and smile slow to appear. And Verger's feelings for Margot… they were a road he didn't want

to go down.

“Well, he's not invincible,” Will assured, half to convince himself.

The things Verger had done to him, the things he'd gotten away with... it was a wonder he *wasn't*.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

District 12 was exactly how he remembered, industrial and rundown, looking as if it was barely surviving out here in the outskirts of Panem. It was there for coal, if he remembered right. It had been a while since he'd sat in a classroom and listened to a drawl of propaganda about the Capitol and its importance, so his memory was hazy on the respective purposes of each Districts.

Now they were here, however, he was becoming increasingly wary of his decision to join the mission. Pazzi hadn't exactly issued any orders yet, as they examined the District from a distance, crouched in the trees opposite it, but they would come. How would they stop the Peacekeepers? Fight them, most likely, but what then? *Kill* them? A knot of stress was tightening in his stomach as he thought of all those lives, people just like him, like the people he'd grown up around, milling about and continuing with their lives, unaware of what was about to hit them. Would they reject this? Would they embrace it?

Both seemed equally dangerous; both would throw them into a war.

But that would come regardless of what they chose. Their only decision was which side they would be fighting for. At least, Will supposed, Thirteen would give them the freedom to make such a choice. Before them, life buzzed on, the people of the District cooking and cleaning in their ramshackle houses or down in the mines, chipping away, working tirelessly for the Capitol, who rewarded them by snatching two of their children once a year. Out here, they were truly impoverished, more than most, living in a poverty that Will had never come close to experiencing in District 4. It was one of the richer Districts, really, in comparison to their counterparts in different areas, Will had supposed he'd been poor.

But here, it was horrific. He'd seen it before, on the Victory Tour, another lifetime ago, but the screaming thoughts of Matthew Brown and his fanged, coal-smudged smile had been far too loud for him to wrap his head around the goings on of where he was. Now, he could see clearly, and he worried for it. To decimate this place would be easy for the Capitol, as simple as another one of their extravagant, throwaway parties. It was likely, considering their extreme lack of wealth, that Twelve would join them and fight, but that only made them more of a target. All this could be destroyed. An entire community, their own little civilisation.

Everyone would die one day. But whatever was about to occur, this oncoming storm that could arrive at any moment… so many could die in its wake.

Was the price of freedom really worth it?

***

He posed the question to Beverly as they stood by the square in Twelve, watching the people mill about, either with a new spring in their step or a deep dread slowing their movements.

“Yes,” she answered, almost instant. “Freedom is always worth it. I'll always fight for what I believe in.”

Fierce affection throbbed in him, molten and hot in his stomach. Bev was so, so brave, and here he was, considering great moral questions that she already knew the answers to. Perhaps that was his problem: there was no intellectual truth to it all, it was something intrinsic. Something Bev probably didn't consider, something she just *knew*, that she *felt*.

Or maybe he was just a coward.

“Those who won't fight are welcome to return to District Thirteen with us for safety,” Pazzi was saying, mid-speech. Will hadn't been able to bring himself to listen to it all, had instead watched the shock register on the residents' faces, followed by daunting hope or sickening fear. “There should be enough room for all of you, if need be.”

Will couldn't quite tell which way this would swing. Their entrance hadn't exactly been graceful, nor had it been friendly. Peacekeepers were trapped in the Justice Building as they spoke, unconscious, most of whom likely had a fair few injuries to speak of. Will could see the urgent terror in the faces of the District 12 residents, that worry that it was the Capitol, finally here to kill them all. But the Peacekeepers had been dragged away, and then the confusion had hit. And here they were, with Pazzi standing above them all on that stage that had been used so often for Capitol indoctrination, offering them… what? Freedom? Freedom that they would have to fight and die for?

Was that freedom at all?

If it was, Bev believed it was worth it. And didn't he believe in her? Didn't he trust her more than anybody?

“Do you think they'll fight?”

The voice came from behind him, and he was surprised that it came in the form of a question. He recognised that voice- it was the voice of Abel Gideon, who was for once not claiming to know everything, and instead looking for guidance. Will couldn't imagine there were many people Gideon would admit were intellectually superior to him, so was unsurprised when he heard the answering voice, feeling it resonate deep within him.

“Look at their faces.” Hannibal sounded as he always did, sure and steady, that mask he presented to the rest of the world. But in the dark, in the quiet, he could soften. Will knew it firsthand; his voice would slip into a loving whisper, pressed against fair skin, and his breath would catch, overwhelmed. Of course, from an outside perspective, nobody would guess that. Nobody would see him as the soft and doting lover that he truly was, because he appeared so hard and unaffected when they weren't alone, when in reality there was an untouched vulnerability waiting just under the surface, rising like a wave whenever Will put his hands on him. It was what made him so fascinating, after all. An adoring boy in the shell of a monster. “They're persuaded. They're *angry*.”

“Will anger be enough to motivate them?”

Hannibal paused, brain almost audibly working, before he finally exhaled shakily in what sounded like a silent chuckle.

“I forget you grew up in District Thirteen, Abel, forgive me,” he murmured. “Let me put it in simpler terms: these people have lived a life where everything has been decided for them. They've only ever had the *illusion* of control- they answer to a higher power, and unwillingly so. Nobody ever loves their own dictator. They only comply out of fear, and the fearless? They rebel, and in most cases, they die.”

“District Thirteen isn't that much better, if you ask me. Crawford-”

“Don't you dare,” Hannibal cut in, low and angry, vibrating in barely constrained rage. “Don't you *dare* compare your personal issues with your *democratically elected* President to the hardships of these people. It's an insult. The sufferings that they… that *we* have endured… you wouldn't be able to comprehend it, Abel. You'd be helpless. These people are stronger than you could ever hope to be.”

“We may not have the Hunger Games in District Thirteen but we still have *problems*,” Gideon spat. “Don't reduce them to nothing.”

The air was shifting behind Will, and he knew from experience, from intimacy, that Hannibal was rounding on Gideon, furious and burning with it.

“Your problems are listened to. They're considered. You live in a paradise compared to this hell,” Hannibal hissed. “In the Districts, we sometimes don't get food. I admit, I was lucky. I was wealthy and from District One, which doesn't suffer nearly as much as a place like this, and yet I still *saw*. The poorer of my acquaintances, how they would wither as time went on, how they would die. Your problems are a matter of how things are run, and they are heard. Our problems? They're deadly. Just ask your President. The only reason she's still alive is because she fled back to Thirteen. She would've died of a simple illness in Four. So yes, trust me when I say that anger will be enough to get them to fight. They don't want to be oppressed any longer, made to live in huts and give most of their supplies to the Capitol, with only meagre earnings left behind. They've been yearning for freedom all their lives. It's enough.”

Will wanted, more than anything, to turn around. To seize Hannibal and kiss him like their lives depended on it, like they were under that moonlit sky again in the arena, kissing and kissing, the first time, the start of forever. Gideon had always made his skin crawl. Perhaps he was no Verger, but he was privileged and tactless, clumsy with his words and inelegant in his alarming lack of understanding or empathy. All of them were, really, all those lucky men and women that knew no different than a life in District 13. They had some awareness that it was a horror show up here, but their issues… they were so *trivial* and it made Will sick to his stomach that all these people had been worrying about their entire lives were minor annoyances rather than the pervading, life-threatening fear that was simply a side effect of being alive up here.

It wasn't like Will didn't know, logically, that nobody deserved an existence like this, and that it was a miracle that some had managed to avoid it. It wasn't as if he didn't look into the innocent faces of teenagers in Thirteen and feel a pang of joy that they didn't suffer the same

constant concern that he had, plagued by the concept of fighting to the death in an arena made just for them.

But he also felt a sting of jealousy, because… why couldn't that have been him?

It was nothing but an accident of birth, but resentment began to build when he focused on it, thinking longingly of children like Miriam and their sheltered lives. She wanted so desperately to fight, looking down on the training area with a yearning ache in her eyes, following the arch of weapons with hopeful hunger. She had no idea what it really was to fight, to be forced so close to death at such early an age. Yet she *wanted* it. And however much she tried to understand Will's hopeless explanations, she couldn't. She wouldn't ever be able to.

“I didn't...” It was all Gideon had to say, voice uncharacteristically timid, almost entirely subdued by Hannibal's sharp words.

“You didn't think,” Hannibal snapped. “I'm aware. You're a fool, Abel, and everybody knows it. You don't belong here and you *certainly* don't belong on a battlefield. You aren't fighting for liberation, or *any* cause, for that matter. You're fighting because you *like* it, and you think that nobody sees this. Well, they *do*. You're not very adept at hiding it. Furthermore, you think you're the only one. You think you're special because you enjoy the feeling of blood slipping through your fingers. Here's the truth: you aren't. You aren't *special,* and you aren't the only one. I've met a hundred men just like you in my short time on this earth, and I suppose to an extent, I'm one of them. The difference between us, you ask? You aren't as clever as you think you are. “

“And you are?”

“Did you listen to a word I just said? I know how clever I am,” he answered, “and now you do as well.”

“Maybe showing me how *clever* you are wasn't the best idea,” Gideon spat. “I'm not exactly trustworthy.”

“My intellect isn't a secret, Abel, which you would know if you'd seen the tapes,” Hannibal replied. “You obviously don't have the clearance for something like that- if you did, you'd also know what I'm capable of.”

“With your oh so great intelligence?”

“With my hands,” he said, and Will heard Gideon's breath stop short. “With my teeth. With my strength. I've tortured and I've killed; I choked the life out of a man in minutes after he touched my beloved. The power of taking a life… I know you haven't felt it- your eyes are hungry, they're unwise. But that power, you'll feel it in your throat, in your *gut*. I've experienced it again and again, over and over. It comes as easy to me as breathing. You may think you have the expertise on murder, Abel Gideon, but your wildest dreams couldn't come close to the reality that I have lived. You don't know a thing, not really. You're *weak,* and one day I'll snuff the light from you. You will die by my hand, I assure you.”

Gideon's breath caught, but apart from that, he remained motionless and speechless. Will didn't know how he kept his composure- he knew Hannibal better than anybody and he thought even *he* would feel a little bubble of fear if those words were directed to him. Will had to admit, it was irritating that it didn't seem to affect him. He deserved it, after all. People like Miriam Lass, like Abel Gideon, even if there was a vast difference between them, they needed to see. They needed to hear the truth, the truth that their so-called *problems* paled when compared with what these people had endured. What Will and Hannibal had endured. What they had endured *together*.

And they would do the same with whatever was to come.

Chapter End Notes

with all the hannigram softness in this fic, will would do best not to forget who hannibal really is...

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What to come- it was a war.

When the sounds of a hovercraft thrumming in the distance began to echo throughout the air, Pazzi's voice wavered, and cut off. What it meant was unmistakeable: the Capitol was coming. They were here, even.

“I don't understand,” Pazzi said, turning to them all clustered at the side of the stage, half picked up by the microphone. “The Peacekeepers...”

“Should all be passed out,” Sogliato finished, expression frozen in horror. Immediately, he swivelled to Hannibal, who was pushing forward to him, past Will without even throwing him a look. “Get everybody to the District borders,” Sogliato barked, expressing it to all of them but eyes still fixed on Hannibal, helpless. “There's nowhere they can hide. Not with that sort of firepower.”

“Oops.” Will heard it from behind him, loud and clear and brave. He spun, just as he assumed everyone else did, to see Gideon's burgeoning smirk, aimed at Hannibal. It was clear: he'd quite conveniently neglected to knock out all of the Peackeepers he'd been responsible for, which they'd used to their advantage and *notified the Capitol*, who were now here to kill them all. “Not very clever?”

There wasn't enough time, and they all knew it, but that didn't stop Hannibal from storming forward, grasping Gideon by the lapels of his shirt. Hannibal's fury was usually cold, imperceptible, only seen through the dead blankness in his eyes and the sudden stiffening of his posture. But this anger... it was hot and slick like blood, burning, flaming, bright and red.

“How could you,” Hannibal was saying, shaking him, and Gideon was simply smiling through it all, smug and happy.

“I was curious to see what would happen,” Gideon replied, before Hannibal threw him to the ground in frustration, shoulders heaving. Then he turned, leaving Gideon grinning on the floor and turning to Sogliato.

“You're right,” he said, a surprise to Will, a surrender to Sogliato. “We need to get them out of here.”

When the first bomb dropped, it was a shock to all of them. With the altercation in front of them they'd been distracted, eyes drawn to the now-laughing form of Gideon and not focused on the sky like they should've been, where a great hulking shape was now beginning to block out the sun, engines thundering above them. The explosion at the far side of District 12 was distant, but not distant enough, ringing in Will's ears as everything seemed to happen at once. Piercing screams erupted, and rushed footfalls begin to increase tenfold as the population of

this falling District ran for its walls. Blood was pumping throughout his body, roaring in his ears alongside the stinging buzz of adrenaline.

It felt as if he were watching through a blurred lens as Pazzi jogged from the stage, nearly tripping as he darted down the steps toward them. He was shouting orders and directing people to the borders of Twelve, pointing to the distance, the hills and the trees, in some desperate hope that it would shelter them and all of these people. It was either that and accept the fact that they just might die here today, in this foreign place, so far from home, on a fruitless mission that had failed more terribly than any of them could've dreamed. And...

Abigail.

He hadn't said goodbye. He hadn't even thought about it.

See you later, was the last thing he'd said to her. He had been so thoughtless. He had been so foolish.

Then the second bomb came, and it was far, far closer than Will would've liked, the force of it knocking him back to the floor beside Gideon, ragged breaths tearing from his chest. His ears rung harder, the white noise long and wailing in his brain. His hand shifted against a piece of debris, scraping blood from his palms, rough and tearing.

“Will,” someone was screaming, and through the smoke a figure emerged, looming over him precariously. A hand reached down, grabbing his, making the cut that he'd just acquired sting in protest. He was hauled to his feet, tugged against a solid body, head spinning. “Will.”

Hannibal even looked beautiful covered in soot, a gash curving along the side of his face, dripping with wet blood. Will's hand trailed up to touch it, feeling the sticky, scarlet liquid yield beneath his fingertips. Staring at his fingers, the crimson tint of his nails and red-filled creases on his knuckles, he felt his head go faint, the energy draining from his body before he could even take his next breath. Hannibal caught him as he began to fall, hands going round to snatch his waist, sealing around his back, leaving half-dipped in his arms like some fair maiden or damsel in distress. Will laughed, dizzy and uncaring, as Hannibal watched him, transfixed.

“Is this where we live happily ever after?” Will asked, and another explosion echoed behind them, not close enough to do anything but disturb the air with more smoke. Hannibal straightened, dragging Will with him, righting his feet on the crumbling ground.

“I think it'll be a while before we get our happy ending,” Hannibal whispered, and stepped back from him. “Come on, Will. We need to go.”

Before he could quite register it, Hannibal was yanking him by the wrist across the square, open and exposed, faster than his feet could handle. Panic was finally beginning to spread, quickening his movements as he followed Hannibal's run. How long would they be running for? It took a few hours to reach the square from one side of the District- it wasn't some tiny town. It was an entire region, and they were right in the centre of it. There was a possibility they wouldn't escape in time, and a large one at that. Mid-motion, he threw his eyes around the District, silent with horror as it fell on a woman burning to death where she lay,

screaming in agony, and drifted to a man trapped beneath a fallen building, limp and in a pool of his own blood. No more District 12. No more tiptoeing around a war. It had begun, and they had lost the first battle.

There was no ache in his legs as he ran this time. He couldn't feel it, just the numb shivering of surprise. Hannibal was relentless, tugging him further and further with no regard to the dead around them and no concern for the dying, pulling in earnest over mounds of debris and fallen bodies. After a short while, the houses began to thin, indicating that they were potentially approaching the outskirts of the District. And sure enough, through the gaps in the buildings, Will could see the hills, and the crowds moving up them, their worried pain buzzing throughout the air and carrying all the way to where he and Hannibal were soldiering through the ruins of the District. They weren't there yet, but the end was visible. They might just...

The earth shook behind him with another violent explosion, throwing them both forward, front-first onto the gravel of the ground. It shocked the air from his lungs, leaving him wheezing for oxygen, head throbbing with the effort and trauma of it all. Dazed, he only looked on as his bloody hands scrabbled for purchase to push himself upright. Everything was hazy and smoke-filled, the burning smell invading his nose and the taste of ash in the air resting on his tongue. As he went to lean up, a hand pushed him back down, winding him all over again, but instead guiding him to the left, urgent but supportive. Falling back against a wall, coughs forced their way from his chest, rejecting all the smoke he'd likely inhaled. Through blurry sight, he saw Hannibal crouching over him, nudging up his chin and prodding at his face in unconcealed concern.

“If I die-”

“You won't,” Hannibal interrupted. “You aren't going to die.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I love you,” he said, matter-of-fact, steadfast. His face was set and determined but his eyes were wild with passion as they met Will's, flames reflected in them, his own fire of adoration. The hand that had been checking Will's head for injuries fell to his jaw, holding there, soft. “I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. I'll die before I let them touch you.”

“You love me more than you loved Mischa?” Old pain flickered on Hannibal's face, decaying sorrow that creased his brow and clenched his jaw. Even through the haze of battle, Will felt a pang of remorse. “Sorry,” he muttered, mind still reeling from it all, but Hannibal shook his head, dismissing it.

“You're clearly concussed. No need for apologies,” he said shortly. Then that look came onto his face, the one that meant he was about to start rambling, starry-eyed and smitten, and he took a shaky breath in as his hand twitched against Will's cheek. “But if you must know… Mischa has been dead a long time, my darling. She died so young, not yet a fully realised person, and… well, I never really knew her at all. Not like I know you. When I say I love you more than anyone, I mean it. I *mean* it, Will. What you are to me… there aren't words. You're everything. You're-”

It was Will's turn to interrupt, lurching up abruptly to shove their mouths together in lieu of whatever goodbye they could ever hope to have. He'd said goodbye to Hannibal before, but not like this. Not with imminent death raining down upon them and flames licking their way toward them, getting hotter by the second. The kiss tasted of ash and farewell, of smoke and forever. Hannibal could try to convince him they would live, but Will could feel blood on his hands and his head, sticky on the skin of his chest where his shirt had torn, exposing it. There wasn't any way he could see them escaping this alive, not without a miracle. So this was it, his great love story, coming to an end. Killed by a bomb- how pedestrian. Will had always thought they'd kill each other.

Gasping for breath, he finally pulled back, teeth sinking into Hannibal's lip before he did. Hannibal's hands, the other of which had followed its partner up to Will's face, twitched against his jawline with want. Will hadn't quite been able to decide between a kiss that was a soft parting, mouth pressed against mouth and nothing more, or a kiss that was all tongues and teeth, violent in its honest devotion. So he'd settled for a desperate cross between the two, no longer preoccupied with the concept of choice. He was about to die, after all. Why not live while he still could?

“You know I love you too,” he said carelessly, hopelessly, voice filled with great emotion. “I love you and I don't want to die. But if I do, you need to know that.”

“You *won't*,” Hannibal repeated, frantic, hands finally dropping to his sides as he peered around the wall they were taking a brief respite against. Will watched as his expression cleared of worry, instead chased by hope, by that cold calculation that he could always manage so well.

“If I-”

“*Stop it*,” Hannibal hissed, forgetting all about checking for explosives to glare at Will, frustration alight in his expression. “You aren't going to die. *I will not let them take you from me.”*

“You have to tell them, Hannibal,” Will replied, mind still caught on all the possibilities. Would he die burning, or from blood loss? Would it be a building that collapsed on him? He trusted Hannibal more than anything, but he wasn't an idiot: those assurances weren't certain. Nothing was when the sky was dropping bombs on them, and not even Hannibal could save him from a fate like this. “You have to tell them how I love them.”

“I won't have to.”

“Abigail, Beverly, Georgia… Hell, even Peter. And Jack, too. Tell them,” he pleaded, hands fisting the fabric of Hannibal's shirt, face falling in pain. Hannibal's eyes were still fixed on some vague point around the wall, face set as he decidedly ignored Will's words. “I might not make it out of here, and if I don't, I want you to leave me. Leave my body behind, because I know what you're like- my corpse isn't more important than your life. Leave so you can tell them how I love them.”

Hannibal finally turned back to him, intensity screaming in his expression. He shook his head, sighing, as Will waited expectantly for the lecture.

“It won't come to that,” he said softly, softer than Will had expected, and for the first time he felt a bubble of optimism rise in him. Maybe there really was a way to survive this… he wanted to think so, at least. “I swear to you, you'll get to tell them yourself.”

“Okay,” Will whispered in response, tremulous. “But put my mind at ease. Promise me. Just in case.”

“Okay,” Hannibal murmured, reluctant but true. Tenacity was still dancing in his eyes, however, unmoveable, as strong as ever. It reminded him of all those years ago, in that very same clearing Brown had nearly violated him in, when Hannibal had touched his face and promised to save him and Beverly. It reminded him of after that, with Budge dead on the floor and Bev's ankle creating a pool of blood, Hannibal looking so lost and helpless, so unsure. He hadn't known. The promise he'd made, the resolve he'd shown, it had all amounted to nothing. He could be earnest all he liked, it was no guarantee of salvation, as much as Will wanted it to be. “Now I really think we should keep moving. We likely don't have long until another explosion and we've sat here talking for long enough.”

“Arguing,” Will corrected, and grinned at Hannibal's playful irritation. “When?”

“*Now*,” Hannibal instructed, and then Will was being tugged upwards, thrown unsteadily to his feet, and that, of course, was when he was hit by a vast wave of dizziness, crashing loudly against the jagged rocks of his brain. Blood singing, his vision went black, only one thought rattling around in his mind, tinny and unavoidable.

They had lost.

Chapter End Notes

ugh i had an absolutely awful day. hope this chapter can cheer any of you up as well <3

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Perhaps he'll die.”

“He won't die.”

“How do you know? Maybe this was exactly what I intended.”

“You orchestrated the destruction of an entire District to harm one man? I think not.”

Will would recognise Hannibal's voice anywhere, in any state of mind, in any level of consciousness. It was just lucky that now he was waking, blackness slowly slipping from his mind and senses sharpening to his surroundings: the buzzing of insects and faint conversation, the tickle of grass below him, the smell of pine, bright and unmistakeable. It didn't smell entirely unlike home, if he really thought about it. He was alive. Hannibal was alive. He had kept his promise, he had got them out. Whatever happened now, they could work with it- it was most certainly better than the nothingness that death brought. As soon as he registered these things, however, his lungs began to protest, forcing hacking coughs from his chest, pushing out the toxic lingering of smoke. Desperately trying to sit up and make his wheezing flow a little easier, he found his arms weak and exhausted. The sudden support of another's hands was a blessing, their urgent coaxing exactly what he needed through his incessant spluttering, rather than the accompanied shift of air to indicate the presence of more people, almost suffocating as they crowded over him. As his eyelids eventually began to flutter open, he saw the dark greenery of the forest, rich and welcomed after the rusting, industrial scenery of District Twelve.

“Will?”

“Where does it hurt?”

The second voice was Beverly's, soft as she held him, one hand on his back, rubbing ceaselessly as he choked his lungs up, and the other smoothing through his hair, the same way his mother used to. Her breath was a kind brush on the nape of his neck, and he shut his eyes against the strong surge of gratitude he felt, both towards her and the universe, glad she was helping him but overjoyed that she was alive to do so. So she hadn't perished amongst all the fire- it was a gasping relief, one that felt almost identical to that familiar first gulp of air after a period of time spent underwater, oxygen depleting by the second.

“It's just,” he tried, voice barely a croak, sentence cut short but more uncontrollable coughing. “Smoke.”

“I'm sorry you were down there for so long,” she whispered, so quiet that he suspected even Hannibal and Georgia couldn't hear where they were crouched by his side, attentive and concerned. “I'm sorry I didn't go back for you.”

“Don't,” he said, tilting his neck so he could see her face. He was sure he looked comical and upside-down to her, but the sincerity of his words hopefully outweighed that. “Don't apologise. You did the best you could. Returning didn't equal a guarantee on saving me- you could've just gotten yourself killed. It could've been for nothing. So I don't blame you, not for anything. I'm just glad you're here.”

Her hand found his, fingers darting across his knuckles, feather-light. It was that old intimacy resurfacing between them as he lay in her arms, a familiarity that arguably couldn't even be matched by what he and Hannibal had. What *did* he and Hannibal have? He had kissed him, moments before potential death, in some fearful despair, some form of terrified farewell that he felt that they deserved, after all that they had been through. But it didn't change what had happened, or what he had felt. He had needed to be free of their claustrophobic love, the love that was so cloying it only rose like a flood whenever they touched, brushed shoulders, caught eyes. That power was frightening when he really gave it some thought, and it was part of the reason things had fallen apart. Will hadn't even lived two decades, and he was dancing dangerously with death, the tones of a lover so familiar in his ear. Perhaps he was never destined for normality. Perhaps everything was always going to lead here, in the midst of a war with a force so much greater than he was, an opponent that could quite literally burn cities to the ground, leave them smoking and charred, nothing but vanished homes on the horizon.

“Will,” Hannibal was saying, eyes wide and full, longing. His hands were balled into fists and resting on his knees, clenched so tight his knuckles were white. Will knew he was desperate to touch, stroke his hands along Will's face and grasp at his hands, hang on tight while Will fought back to health. “You're alive.”

“You said I would be.”

“I swore.”

“You were right,” Will breathed, thankful affection heavy in his chest. “Thank you.”

“There's nothing to thank,” Hannibal dismissed. “I told you I wouldn't let you die and I meant it. I wouldn't lie. You're here.”

“What happened?”

“You fainted,” he explained, and Will would feel embarrassed, but to give himself some credit, he *had* inhaled great amounts of smoke and suffered multiple blows to the head when he'd kept being thrown to the floor. “I caught you.”

Will was taken back, almost vividly, to when Hannibal had emerged from the smoke at Verger's mansion, like some great avenging angel. They had held each other tighter than they ever had, and when Will had finally been freed, he'd fallen into Hannibal's arms like he was the weak-willed woman in one of those ridiculous romance novels in the library, the ones that treated love as though it were easy and women as though they were nothing more than a body with a one-dimensional personality. And here, he had done it again. It was becoming an unwilling trend.

“You carried me?”

“Of course,” he replied, bemused that Will would even ask. Will himself didn't even want to imagine it, torn between feeling infantilised and warm. Carried in Hannibal's arms, protected and safe. It wasn't an *unpleasant* image, but one he would put aside for later, when it was dark and he was lonely, the space beside him on the pillow stone-cold.

“Like a bride,” Georgia remarked, grinning between them, quirking an eyebrow when Will shot a glare at her, despite its lack of fire.

Hannibal didn't have a response to that, did nothing more than tilt his head in admittance. Their eyes caught, and the wind seemed to slow, the earth feeling as if it had stopped spinning below them. It had been like this at the beginning, Will remembered, the glint of Hannibal's eyes enough to combat nature itself. It had felt as though the world had grown from the curl of his lip and the spark of his smile, that all that had existed before was meaningless now Will had him. He supposed that period where everything was bright and new was over now, had ended a long time ago, leaving a soft familiarity behind in its place. Will wouldn't say either bond was stronger. It was just *different,* and so were they. Everything had changed when he'd been forced into the Games, including himself. The boy who'd held his sister's hand on the way to the reaping was not the same boy- *man*- who lay in the dirt and the grass now, head reeling from the sights and sounds of a whole District burning to the ground.

“You should eat,” Bev was saying then, shifting to his side, easing him up to sit on his own. But Hannibal's eyes were an ocean of umber eternity at his fingertips, and he hadn't been less interested in eating since he'd had his first meal in the Capitol, eating too much too fast with no room left for the hundred other courses they had to offer. “There's nuts. I think.”

“You 'think'?”

“There isn't any food left,” she admitted, and Will, surprised, took the chance to glance around the campsite- if it could be called that. There were no sleeping bags, just people lying on the ground with the mud and insects, a bed that Will was used to but suspected that many of them weren't, cosy in District 13 all their lives or used to at least a basic mattress back in Twelve. A small fire crackled in the vague point of centre, but most avoided it, some staring into the flames with a dazed, terrified expression. Will wasn't sure how many of them were from District 12, and felt a pang of pity for those who looked especially blackened and traumatised. “It all burned back there. Not many people stopped to grab their packs- we've basically been living off nuts and berries.”

“Sounds familiar,” he huffed, eyes darting up to Hannibal's again, shining in amusement, before falling to the forest floor, the way discarded leaves travelled on the breath of the wind. “How long was I out?”

“Less than a day,” she replied. “But you know how kids get hungry.”

His heart ached in sympathy, and his gaze trailed up to focus on the people surrounding him, not all of which were adults, an aspect he had barely even *thought* about. Children- *infants*, even. And they had lost their homes in a blaze of fiery glory, and perhaps even their families.

It was unlikely everybody had survived the bombing, and if so, how many children had perished back there? How many more innocents did Verger need to punish before he was satisfied?

“How many?” he asked, voice dropping to barely a whisper, a tremble of fear injected into his tone.

Beverly didn't reply, falling entirely quiet as she glanced away, biting her lip in sorrow. The air pulled tense, shortening Will's breath, making him want to cough all over again, the itch in his throat increasing as he inhaled in fearful anticipation. He didn't need to specify how many what, because they all knew what he meant as soon as he said it, had all been through far too much not to make the connection. That was the thing about living so close to death for so long: they became accustomed to the gaps in sentences and what should fill them, grew used to the silences in the dark, the ready presence of grief.

“Too many,” Hannibal said, and Will's heart fell like a stone in the sea, the sudden weight of it almost drawing tears to his eyes. All those people. All those lives, snuffed out in moments. Well. It had seemed like moments to him- to them, it had probably been a long, painful death, skin and flesh feeling the hot burn of flame cut through layers of their bodies. “There are only a small handful more people returning with us. We lost some of our own and… a lot of theirs. They just didn't make it out in time, or they were unlucky to be standing where they were.”

Real compassion was a look rarely seen on Hannibal's face when not directed to Will or perhaps his closest of friends- Bedelia, Chiyoh… Beverly? But here, now… the sadness on his face wasn't false. A lot of lives had been lost, and while Hannibal undoubtedly didn't mind murder, the killing of thousands of innocents wasn't really something he revelled in. Not while their killer was so much worse.

Their killer was Verger. It was the Capitol.

It was Abel Gideon, who was sat mere metres away, leaning against a tree and staring up to the sky. Will was certainly grateful he was out of earshot, but the rush of violent fury he felt toward him was unmatchable, like nothing he remembered feeling before, and what he would have done if Georgia hadn't noticed the expression on his face, he didn't know. She moved quickly, shifting only slightly to block Gideon from view and bring her face into the forefront of Will's vision.

“Don't,” she warned, and he felt nausea rise in his throat. “He's a prisoner. Let the law deal with him back in Thirteen. Let him suffer real justice.”

“*Justice*?” Will repeated. “Is there a death penalty in Thirteen?” Georgia looked to Hannibal, who shook his head in confirmation, before glancing back to Will with a hungry glint in his eye. “Then there's no real justice here.”

“You can't just kill him.”

“Can't I?”

“People would stop you.”

“I'd do it away from camp.”

“*Will*,” she snapped. “You aren't allowed to kill him. It isn't fair. It isn't right. You didn't lose anybody back there- if Abel Gideon should have to pay for his crimes through death, which I'm not sure I agree with, then it shouldn't be *you* who delivers the punishment. What about all the people from Twelve who lost their families? What about Sogliato's wife, waiting back in Thirteen for a man who'll never return to her?”

“Sogliato?” Will whispered, mostly in shock. He hadn't been particularly fond, but he hadn't wished for real harm to come to the man. Hannibal nodded to him, not looking too broken up about it, and Will felt a twinge of suspicion. It was probably nothing, but the twitch of Hannibal's mouth… “What about Pazzi?”

“Injured,” Bev answered. “But alive.”

Will felt a sigh of relief rush through him. Pazzi hated Hannibal, who barely tolerated him in turn, slightly extending the animosity to Will by association. But they could both admit the man was a fearsome strategist and likely the best person to be leading any army against the Capitol. Will and Hannibal could fight alright, but they couldn't lead. They fought raw and angry on the wet earth, fought to kill with no thought to self-preservation but the reliability of survival instinct. With Pazzi *and* Sogliato dead, Bella would look to Jack or Hannibal, it was most likely, and while Will would feel comfortable with Jack in charge, he knew he was a lot safer in Pazzi's hands, a man who had been doing this for decades rather than a man who had been dealing with a smaller, bastardised version that was only successful a few times. Pazzi surviving was good news, which was perhaps something he needed amidst all this terror.

“It's Gideon's fault,” he hissed, feeling the rage bubble to the surface again, knowing the sight of him was right behind Georgia and therefore visible if he tilted his head enough. “How can we sit here and carry on talking like normal while he's over *there*? Responsible for the deaths of *thousands*?”

“Because we have to,” Hannibal murmured, looking equally as pleased as Will was sure he himself looked, a grimace spread across his mouth and a frown creasing his brow.

“Why?”

“Sacrifices have to be made. For freedom. For us.”

His eyes were rich in the light. Will felt it encompass him like he was drifting out to sea, sinking underwater; willing, wanting, weak.

Us.

He loved, he loved, he loved.

Chapter End Notes

happy valentine's day all (or 15th of feb if you're where i am). hope you had a good one :)

Chapter 25

The cold, hard atmosphere of Thirteen was something Will was grateful for when they returned, sinking down away from the sun and back into the darkness. He was at peace for perhaps the first time since he'd first arrived, seeking any refuge from Verger's cells and his extensive use of a blade, a whip, a needle, or whatever suited him on that particular day. Back then, Thirteen had been all new and it had meant *hope*, had represented all that he wanted this world to become. Then, of course, he had grown restless, and what had once been his greatest relief had grown into prison of his own making.

Now, he supposed, anything was better than what was waiting up there.

Bella took pity on him and abstained from ushering him into whatever debrief or explanation that was to occur from those who had made it back alive, instead visiting him in the hospital wing as he got checked over, glad for the stitches now running along the exposed patches of his skin, made vulnerable by the remains of what used to be his shirt.

His fingers drifted along the scar across his cheek. It was now faded and pink but Will knew it would always remain, a faint reminder of Dolarhyde and his moonlit moments of glory with Hannibal.

There wasn't much said between he and Bella, and his recount of events simply confirmed the story he assumed she already knew. Her face was tired and sad, worn down by the woes of war, but it was kind, as it always had been. Will knew her to be fierce and intelligent, perhaps more so than anybody he'd ever known, but her face was always soft, eased by the classic beauty that shaped her features and the benevolent nature that she could never fully prevent from spilling to the surface. Her hand covered his on the hospital bed when he finished speaking, gripping tight, her expression caught in heavy grief. They had lost a lot that day, but her awareness of it was fresh and painful, not days old like Will's. He had at least had some time to cope, to come to terms with… whatever that had been, back there. Bella felt the weight of it all at once, and the helplessness that came from being an observer.

“I'm sorry, Will,” she said. “I'm sorry you had to see that. That you had to experience it. If you were a month younger...”

“I'm not, though,” he whispered, not sure whether or not he lamented it. “And I've seen enough in my lifetime to live with memories like that. It was just… unexpected.”

“It's why we take the risk of something like that happening,” she murmured. “So that the children of the future won't end up like you.”

When she left, Will felt a little less hopeless. Existing on a crumbling edge, balancing on violence and surviving off love, a force that was slowly becoming outweighed by the bloody brutality… it was no way to live, not really. Not for someone who had been a child a month ago. He had been a child when this had all started, had made that *decision* as a child, a decision that a child should never have to make. Choose: watch your loved ones die or die

yourself. Of course, Will had been lucky, incredibly so, but the twenty-one other people in the arena hadn't been. Some of them had died by his hand.

It hadn't meant they'd deserved it.

Not all of them.

Abigail was all sad smiles and sighs when he saw her again, took her into his arms and came home. She clung on as tight as she ever had, fingers digging uncomfortably into his spine, making him wince with the pain. But he let her, hanging onto her in return. Because it was something real, something other than the dull ache of battle after battle. Maybe Will should sit the next one out. Take a breather. He would surely struggle with the knowledge that a mission was going on, one he had no control over, but this would make it all worth it. Never having to go through another reunion, never having to even miss Abigail in the first place. Not having to swallow down the acidic taste of watching her worry.

“You won't do that,” she remarked when he suggested it, practically laughing in his face. “You'll be right there next to Hannibal, in the middle of it all.”

“I hope not.”

“So do I,” she said, voice dropping to a whisper. “One of these days it'll get you killed. *He'll* get you killed.”

“You don't like him,” Will observed. “I thought you liked him?”

“I *do*,” she protested, frustrated, frowning as she tried to find the words. “I like *this* him. But who he was in the arenas… he was different. More adapted to the danger. That's all I can see when I think of you two out there, day after day, facing all of that same shit that you did before. But this time, I can't monitor it, I can't *check*. You could've been *dead* for all I knew. It *sucked*.”

“I'm… sorry,” he murmured, surprised at her outburst. He'd always considered the effect of all this on her, briefly, but it felt like a punch to the gut to actually hear it. She was so young, yet so exposed to the horrors of this inescapable, forsaken world. It wasn't fair, really. He'd tried all he could to prevent her from maturing as quickly as he had, but what was there to do? She'd watched all he had been through, and it had clearly taken its toll. Her long-lost innocence had faded that very day Abigail's name had been produced and read with ringing, haunting clarity that had echoed throughout the square. “Hannibal saved me, if its any consolation.”

“Again?” she asked, eyes twinkling in mirth, and he huffed a reluctant breath of laughter. A more serious note slipped into her eyes, and she inhaled shakily before speaking again, face set in determined pain. “I know he loves you. And I trust him to try his best to save you. If you did… if you never came back… I wouldn't blame him. I'd know he fought to keep you alive, but he's only a man, Will. There's no guarantee. I can't stop imagining that one day… you won't come home. You'll be buried under rubble somewhere in some District they won't ever set foot in again, or bloodied in Verger's basement, dying slowly, *painfully*-”

“I love you,” he said, full of agonising affection. “If that does happen, you need to know: *I love you*. And I don't enjoy this- fighting, all the time, it's just like the arena. It's not a life I want. And say I do join up to the next mission, even after all this… it's because I have to. Another seventy six years from now, don't you want things to be different? For kids like us? Don't I owe it to them?”

She paused. Her breath was steady as she considered his words, pensive, eyes fixed on the floor. Eventually, she looked up at him, eyes like oceans, calm but simply waiting for a storm.

“Don't *we*?”

“You're fourteen.”

“You were only sixteen.”

“I didn't *want* to be,” he snapped. He loved her, he *did*, but didn't she *understand*? He was a *mess*, and it was because of *that*. It was where it all began. “That should never have had to happen to me, and I'll do everything I can to stop you from going through the same thing. You've got *no idea*.”

“Will-”

“I don't want you to be like me.”

There was some frantic sorrow on her face as she gazed at him, and one of her hands moved to his face, fingernails trailing across the skin of his cheek. Tears only made her eyes more blue, a rainy sky, like puddles in the gravel back in District Four.

“And what is that, exactly?”

“Unfixable.”

***

Abel Gideon's fate wasn't decided right away. Bella was given the information surrounding his betrayal, and locked herself in the conference room with Jack, Pazzi and Hannibal for *days,* intending for them to advise her. Will found himself pacing the corridor hour by hour, waiting desperately for any news, frustration hot on his skin. Throw him to the people, he hoped. Let Gideon's bones break beneath fists, a death that was barbaric and savage like the actions that had led to those consequences. Time seemed to pass like falling treacle, thick and everlasting, making impatience flare in him unpleasantly.

“How long?” he would ask at the end of each day, fingers dancing along Hannibal's forearm as he stared up through his eyelashes, coy, the way he knew Hannibal liked him. Hannibal knew, of course, exactly what he was doing, but fell for it anyway, eyes softening and smile spreading involuntarily.

“Not long. I'll talk to them,” he always promised, ever-eager to please.

They hadn't spoken about what had happened. The most in-depth discussion they'd had was back there in the forest, where their eyes had met and they'd both known the other was thinking of it, a kiss that was all fire and want and goodbye. Hannibal was smart enough to know, it had been temporary. It had been just in case. But now, they were alive, they were here, and things were back to how they had been before, with the small addition of Will's brazen flirting. He knew Hannibal didn't mind it, knew he ate it up like every interaction they had, waiting and wanting, eyes always focused on Will's lips or his eyes or his hands, had they been moving.

“What do you think it'll be?” Will asked, leaning against Hannibal's side as they sat on his bed, head tilted onto his shoulder. A lot of things were different between them, namely the extent of their physical contact, but it didn't mean that everything had changed. They were still friends. They still touched. They were still over-familiar. Hannibal still smelt like home and he still felt like comfort.

“Not death,” Hannibal assured, pulling at one of Will's curls, watching it spring back. Will felt disappointment settle in his stomach, bitter but expected. “Bella won't stand for that.”

“Why did he do it?” Will asked. “I mean *really*. He must've had a *reason*, right? A proper one? One other than curiosity?”

Hannibal was winding the strand of his hair around a finger, transfixed, eyes brimming with his fondness. “I find that to be a perfectly valid reason, if I'm honest.”

“*You* would,” Will muttered, and Hannibal smiled, burying it into his hair before he mouthed a kiss against Will's head. “It doesn't make sense to me. You're destructive, of course, so that sort of impulse decision isn't completely new to me, but on *that* scale? It's insane. He's *insane*. He *should* die.”

“Is that a request?”

A chill ran through Will as his breath stopped short in his throat, recalling so many instances where he'd watched Hannibal take life after life in front of his very eyes. At first, it had scared him, but nearer the end, it had, admittedly, excited him. This… it was on a whole other level. He hadn't watched Hannibal kill in a long, long time, and here, there he was, doing… what, exactly?

“Are you *offering*?”

“Yes,” Hannibal replied, and Will's heart stuttered in his chest. “I would do anything for you, Will. You know that.”

Will shifted from his position against Hannibal, moving away so he could look him square in the face, see the sincerity morphing his expression, the earnest devotion, the ready willingness. His eyes were wide and wet, full with the weight of his love, and there was a small smile curving his mouth, predatory.

“I don't...”

“Yes or no?”

It wasn't right. It wasn't their justice to impart, but then what part of it had been? Will had killed, had done it accidentally and had done it on purpose. He had done it and *enjoyed* it, felt blood on his hands like syrup, tasted it in his mouth like metal. Now… could he orchestrate it? Was he capable, outside the bounds of the arena? Arguably, they were some of the most dangerous places in Panem, but in some ways they were they safest. For Will, they could contain his bloodlust, could justify it, keep him sane. But out here… it wasn't the same. And yet he still wanted Gideon dead, wanted to see the emptiness in his dark eyes and lifelessness in his limp body. He *wanted*.

Things hadn't gone his way in a very, very long time.

“Yes.”

One day later, Abel Gideon went missing.

Two days later, he turned up dead on a cafeteria table, bloodied incisions running up his sides.

Three days later, Will was invited to dinner.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Meat always just tasted like meat, but Will knew exactly what he was eating, looking Hannibal dead in the eyes as he chewed on the cooked flesh of Abel Gideon. He had known that this would happen since the news of Gideon's death had been broken to the District, rather ceremoniously and without any previous indication. Hannibal had caught his eyes across the dining hall, bloodlust flashing in their dark depths, and Will had known. There was an investigation ongoing into his death, but nobody seemed to be too broken up about it, and the kitchen staff, when asked by Hannibal to leave the kitchen open after hours, either didn't suspect a thing or didn't care. Gideon, as far as Will knew, wasn't very well liked- with good reason; his constant disagreements and suspicion were frustrating to spend extended periods of time with. Now, they were free from that. So here they were, so reminiscent of their dinner all those months ago, sitting across from one another in the dim, unable to move their eyes from the other's.

Hannibal's face was shining in the flicker of the candles, and Will's stomach was a sea of want, bubbling up to his throat, his eyes, his skin. It was tangible, hanging in the air between them, lingering like the ash from District 12, that still felt as if it was lodged in his throat sometimes when he woke up screaming into the dark. It was visible, in the flush crawling up Hannibal's cheekbones, the high rise of his cheeks that were lifting with his smile. Will was sure he looked similarly blissful, despite his attempts to keep his composure in check.

“How?”

“Blood loss was what killed him, in the end,” Hannibal answered with a wicked smile, eyes flicking to his plate. “I took him outside. Allowed him some mercy.”

“Nobody noticed?”

“The door isn't guarded after curfews. They expect you'll get caught before you reach it, and they can't spare the manpower for guards stationed everywhere. You just need to be careful enough to avoid them.”

“You're much too clever to get caught, of course,” Will remarked, lip curled into a smirk as Hannibal tilted his head in recognition of the sarcasm, but with lack of denial. Glancing down to his plate, Will pushed around the remaining food. Despite knowing exactly what it was, he'd eaten the meat willingly, relishing every last bite. Did that make him just as much of a monster as Hannibal? Or maybe even more so, since he knew the truth yet refused to come forward? Perhaps worrying about morality was redundant while he loved somebody like Hannibal Lecter. “Any last words?”

“Not much. Just a lot of rambling. Mostly about you,” Hannibal offered, and Will frowned at the words, not quite sure what that said about who Gideon had been, and what he'd thought of Will.

“*Me*?”

“Well, you and I,” Hannibal clarified, catching his eyes ever-so-briefly before tearing them away, falling down to the table.

You and I. There wasn't much of that, recently. They were still friends, of course, could probably never be any less considering what they had been through together, but romantically? That connection was non-existent if the hopeful stares Hannibal threw at his mouth weren't counted, along with ignoring their physical familiarity, the easy embraces they shared and the frequent kisses that were placed anywhere but the mouth were ignored in turn. Will didn't know what he wanted anymore, didn't know what to *do*. He'd thought it was best to step back, at least from the commitment, to free himself from the great expectation of it all. But that had been before: now, war was inescapable, and it seemed fruitless to not live a little. It seemed naive to assume their relationship was still the most important thing amongst all this, when Will had watched as people burned and bled in the places where their bedrooms used to be not one week ago.

Heart stumbling, he watched as Hannibal rose, picking up his own plate and then Will's, walking through the arch into the kitchens. The sound of water running was like a hurricane in Will's ears, the only thing he could hear to accompany the rushing of his blood and the tripping of his pulse. This, here, with shadows dancing along Hannibal's jaw and stardust in his adoring eyes, Will felt loved. Will wanted. And he didn't care about the consequences anymore. So as Hannibal returned to the dining hall, Will stood, tripping his way over to Hannibal, anticipation alight in the air. With the taste of human meat still lying on his tongue, he let Hannibal kiss him, chaste at first but increasing in passion. It wasn't long before he was pushing Hannibal against the wall and kissing him within an inch of his life.

The thrilled gasp that escaped him was captured by Will's mouth, pressed against his tongue and sucked on. The hands that flew up to his hair felt like heaven, and the thighs situating themselves either side of Will's were a sweet ache in his crotch. The way they touched, the way it felt, it was paradise, it was everything he had missed and everything he had needed all these weeks that they hadn't been together. Hannibal's mouth was hot and wet and arousing, and the feeling of him at Will's mercy, pressed flat up against the wall by the force of Will's palms sent shivers of want down his spine. Hannibal wasn't struggling or even trying to, he was surrendering himself entirely to Will's desires so brazenly that he may as well have been submitting like an animal, exposing his throat or his stomach. Instead, he was exposing his heart, as he always did with Will. He'd hold it red and bloody in his hands and look up at him with such reverence, eyes full with whatever beauty he witnessed in the shift of Will's features.

“I found that I couldn't help myself,” Hannibal admitted, apologetic, whispered between their kisses. “You drive me quite mad.”

“Folie à deux,” Will replied, grinning.

The sound that slipped from Hannibal's lips was a pained, wanton groan, the end of which was muffled as he sealed their lips together once more in joy, as bright and real as the hot explosions that Will still saw every time he shut his eyes. Except for now. His eyes were squeezed shut with the power of all his rampant emotions, but he didn't feel or see a thing

that reminded him of that day he wanted so desperately to forget. Hannibal seemed to protect him from that, drawing his thoughts away from battle and strategy to the current flow of blood, the satisfaction of a fight without planning, the slick redness that would stick to his fingers seemingly endlessly.

“Will Graham,” Hannibal was whispering, ragged breaths heaving from his chest, tearing from his throat, “the great love of my life.”

The force of Will's heartbeat raged against his ribcage, the swell of his love so large and unmatchable. Hannibal looked fucking enchanted, mouth parted in such innocent awe as he gazed at Will, eyes so dark in this lack of light. It was times like this that Will welcomed the darkness again, wanted it to enfold him and trap him, warm and comforting. Perhaps their hot, shared kisses weren't exactly comforting, but this was. The richness of their bond, pure electricity singing between them, howling and straining at the simple brush of their fingers. Will's head was swimming with it all, the world tilting on its axis, the saccharine glow of their love floating between them, sharp and smoking.

“Just kiss me, Hannibal,” he murmured, and knew the husk of his voice would be the motivation behind the trembling inhale Hannibal took and the clench of his jaw. Arms wound around Will, then, encompassing him, circling him closer and closer, pulling him impossibly nearer to the solid presence of Hannibal's steady form against him.

“Isn't it the best thing you've ever tasted?” he asked, grinning, teeth glinting in the shine from the candles, and then he pushed their lips together again, mingling whatever tastes had been lingering in their mouths together. Will could sense the rise in confidence within him, the boldness instilled by the thought of feeding Will something he hadn't had the chance to provide for a while. So instead of letting his excitement build, Will expertly shifted his leg forward, ever-further, hitting Hannibal exactly where to make him weak, knocking the breath from his lungs in one fell swoop.

“No. You are,” Will admitted carelessly, too drunk off their close contact to care what these words might mean tomorrow, too drunk to care that he had just consumed all the poison of Abel Gideon, and that the toxins of his words that had bounced from his tongue all too often were now in Will, climbing throughout his body.

“It tastes like freedom,” Hannibal choked out, alternating between attempting to speak and gnawing on his lip to stop himself from moaning, “doesn't it?”

Freedom? Will had tasted freedom. It was the open air and the salt of the sea and the sound of the breeze rustling through the trees, eerie. Murder... to say he *enjoyed* it would be simplistic, but there was a certain excitement that came with it that he couldn't even try denying. That power that had buzzed in his fingertips after he'd taken a life, the heady mix of exhilaration and hunger, he would never forget it. But the difference was: only partook in it when forced into such a situation, never sought it out in the way that Hannibal did. Only killed as a last option, a self-defence, an enthusiastic release of aggression to pander to the Capitol audiences. Yes, blood under his fingernails was more intoxicating than he'd thought, but he had to admit that it reminded him of a time when he hadn't been able to choose, not in the way he could now.

Liberating? Will was having some trouble imagining it.

This wasn't freedom. This was exactly the opposite.

Emotion reached a crescendo within him like blood rising in his mouth, and he tore away from Hannibal as fast as he could, stumbling back, slinging a hand over his mouth to wipe away the taste of this so-called *freedom.* Hannibal was gazing at him in dazed shock, panting, palms falling to press flat against the wall. His eyes squeezed shut, head dropping backwards with a thump, and Will watched as his chest rose with a great, swelling breath.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered, “but that was a mistake.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, and it sounded like a plea. Will didn't think he'd ever heard him so small, so sad and hopeful, voice tapering off into nothing. “Please.”

“I can't. We can't do this.”

Hannibal finally shifted from his defeated, subservient position to gain his footing once more, looking Will square in the eyes, the sweat on his forehead catching the light of the candles like morning dew. The expression on his face wasn't quite fury, but frustration, certainly, borne of aborted arousal and the wreck of their messy, honeysuckle love.

“It's because of what I said,” he observed, regarding Will carefully, taking a small step toward him “You delight in wickedness and then berate yourself for the delight.”

“You delight,” Will uttered, feeling a sting at the jab of the words, finding his stomach hit with a dark, sour disagreement. “I tolerate.”

Hannibal blinked at the words, and if Will didn't know him so well he wouldn't have seen the change in his face, the invisible rejection that made his lip twitch, teeth bared ever-so-slightly. Hannibal swallowed, contemplating his next words.

“Tolerance is a fig leaf to hide your ravenous self from the world,” he eventually spoke, taking another step, moving closer to Will, the way he'd been doing since that very first day they met, all these past years. Magnets gravitating toward each other, they'd never been able to escape this pull, the desire to draw ever-closer, press up against one another and breathe the scent of home and white-hot worship.

Will's love was bird, allowed briefly to fly free, before being caged once more in his guarded heart, yearning, learning. Its wingbeats matched his pulse, now slowing with his mourning. The shivering inhale he breathed felt like farewell, the words slipping like drops of ink onto paper, like rain falling against dampened skin, the push of the tide to the beach. The sea would come up and swallow them all, one day, wipe their existence from the sand so cleanly that the future wouldn't know they even existed at all. Wouldn't know the bright rises of love in their story, the beauty and the bloodshed, shining upon them, reflected moonlight, raining stars. There was rapture where Hannibal's eyes touched him, but pain, too. Balancing on the edge of a precipice that they would perhaps never return from.

“I don't have your appetite.”

Chapter End Notes

again: this isn't the end of hannigram. the fic isn't over yet!

Chapter 27

“We can't wait to find out what he'll do,” Chiyoh was arguing, passion arching through her voice. “He may retaliate by attacking the other Districts- namely, District Four- and we won't be there to save anyone. We have to attack. There isn't time.”

An odd silence followed, an expectant lull in the discussion where most eyes moved to the empty spot beside Pazzi, where Sogliato used to stand. Much like Gideon, he hadn't exactly been popular, but the difference was that Sogliato hadn't deserved to die, as arrogant as he was. He'd given his life for them, for this cause, for their future. His relentless disagreements with Chiyoh had been his misguided method of putting across what he thought was best, and as irritating as it had been, it seemed that they'd all grown used to it along the way, waiting for his voice whenever Chiyoh had finished a point. Even she looked to the empty space, jaw twitching at his absence. Flaws and all, he hadn't been evil. Will would've taken him over Verger, any day.

“She's right,” Hannibal said, no longer beside Will, where he usually placed himself during these meetings. He knew how Will hated them, how restless and stressed he got, always let their fingers tangle together to soothe his frustrated energy, even after they'd fallen apart. But now, he stood halfway across the room, there to support *Chiyoh*. Will didn't harbour any resentment for her, but to say that it didn't make him ache a little in jealousy would be a lie. “Verger's unstable. Easily provoked. What happened back there… it's a war, now. Entirely.”

Panic was thick in the air, unspoken, make nausea rise in Will. How many lives would be lost, if this escalated even further? How many innocent lives?

“Then we move forward,” Bella instructed. “Two days. Then we leave Thirteen. Everyone capable of fighting, at least. Now, onto Abel Gideon- Rinaldo, are there any leads?”

A wave of horror building in him, he could barely stand to hear anymore, and instead opted for turning on his heel and marching from the room, knowing the door would swing shut with a violent slam behind him. The room had fallen silent as soon as he'd moved, something unheard of in meetings like these, but he'd finally had enough. He didn't belong in there, and hearing about the short span of his life wasn't exactly enjoyable. Breath eluding him, it wasn't until he fought his way through a long series of corridors that it didn't feel as if he were about to choke on nothingness, oxygen a sweet, rushing relief as his lungs finally started to work properly.

Two days. Two days until the end of his life began.

To set a date with Death wasn't exactly a common occurrence, not for most people, but then Will had lived through scenarios almost identical to this before. The Games. The time after. The Games, again. Those months in the cells. All had been balancing the line between certain death and miraculous survival, and Will had come out the other side of each, a little less hopeful and a little more despairing every time. He wasn't sure if it meant he would survive

this or if it meant it was finally his time to go, finally his time to die. Rather him than anyone else, he supposed.

Heart aching with the finality of it all, it of course sought the familiar comfort of a friend, most of which were stuck in the very same room he'd just escaped. Beverly was there, a reluctant propaganda tool, with Georgia by her side, skilled enough in the art of murder to be useful to the cause. Hannibal, predictably, was invaluable for the fight to come, and even if not, Will wasn't sure the tense atmosphere currently hanging between them would allow for any comfort to be given. Abigail wasn't even a consideration: she was his responsibility, his to protect. She was a child, thrust into the midst of a war and expected to cope with it. To put this on her, the weight of how likely his impending death was, her own brother… it wouldn't be fair. It didn't leave him with a lot of choice.

“President Verger kept you alive f-for a r-reason,” Peter murmured as Will sunk to the hard floor of his compartment, head falling into his hands. “I don't th-think he'd just k-kill you.”

“He *would've* killed me,” Will muttered, “but Hannibal got there before he had the chance. He just waited too long- you know how he is, he's *sadistic*.”

“Not *then*,” Peter said, and Will frowned, mind speeding through hypothetical explanations. “At the b-beginning.”

The beginning. The start of it all, that fateful final day in the arena, when Verger had freed them, set them on this path of agony and torment that brought them all the way to here, on death's door. Where it would end.

“The Games?”

“He set you f-free,” Peter whispered, and Will remembered it like it was yesterday, tilting his head to see Peter, mind dancing backward through his memory. Verger's unexpected voice, booming throughout the arena, chilling Will's blood and making his hackles rise. The words he had spoken had been etched into Will's brain, the words of salvation, of breathing, gasping relief. He still heard them in his dreams, sometimes, a reminder of simpler times. Those words and he had thought he was free, had assumed that the pain was over. “Maybe th-there was a p-plan.”

Will thought of that wild spark in Verger's eyes as he'd loomed over him in the room full of torture, fluorescent lights and all. The animal way his lip had curled, baring his teeth, sharp and longing. How his voice would remain even until he got *bored*, and it would spike from the dull drawl Will had grown used to, to an energetic babble that made Will's toes curl in fear.

“No,” he said. “I don't think there is.”

“No?” Peter asked, gazing at him quizzically.

“No,” he answered, voice a rasp. “I just think he's mad, Peter. He's a madman. He does whatever he wants, whenever he wants, depending on how he feels. I don't think it runs any deeper than that, if I'm being honest.”

“Madness isn't all b-bad.”

Will looked to him, face creasing with a surge of pity. He grasped Peter's wrist, gripping hard, making him glance back, eyes wide and innocent. There was a powerful rise of desperation in Will, a frantic need to impart understanding, to make Peter *see*.

“You aren't mad, Peter.”

“I'm not s-sane.”

“None of us are,” he admitted, earnest, but distant. “Not after the Games. Not after everything. But does that make us the same as him?”

Peter's defeat was evident as he sighed, nodding, before ducking his head entirely, easing his wrist from Will's tight fist around it. Will muttered an apology, but didn't feel quite as sorry as he sounded. There was a frustration in conversations like this, not only in Peter's self-loathing, but in the complete lack of understanding for Verger's character displayed by practically everyone who wasn't him and Margot. It stung, pushing him to a point where *he didn't know what to do*, didn't know how to convince them of it, how to show them exactly what Verger was capable of. His hands bred destruction like the spring made flowers bloom, his fingers knew the curved base of a blade like a second skin, eyes witnessed hurt as hungrily as those of a monster. Will remembered it vividly, and it stayed with him, haunting him on the daily, flashes of silver when he shut his eyes and a shiver of phantom pain whenever he was left alone. Verger's presence here in Thirteen was most palpable in the silence. Will felt him in his scars, in his stiff muscles, his marred skin. He felt the snap and push of his utensils and the heat of his damp breath, the unsteady octaves of his voice.

“W-will he be expecting us?” Peter questioned once the silence stretched too long, and Will didn't even have to think about the answer.

“Almost undoubtedly.”

“What th-then?”

“We die.”

A note of terror rang in the air, spreading onto Peter's expression, resonating all too clearly with Will. Now was the time to be scared, really, a few days in advance, leaving the actual approach of his death to be free for numb fearlessness. That wouldn't go unappreciated, since they would likely be charging into the Capitol with nothing to spare in only a few weeks. Now was the time to feel. Then, there would be nothing but the rage of the battle.

“I- I don't want to d-die.”

“Oh. You won't,” Will corrected, huffing and allowing Peter a comforting smile. “The people who'll be fighting. We'll die.”

“I don't w-want *you* to d-die.”

Will found himself hit with a wave of sorrow, unbridled and fond. There was such a naive wisdom to Peter's replies, such an honesty, one that was uncommon in a world like this. People lied to survive. They killed to survive. Then, predictably, they died, just like everyone would one day. What if it was all just fruitless? What if Will had fought this hard to only die prematurely? It seemed likely. The universe was good to him like that.

“Yeah. Me neither.”

He didn't want to die, but there appeared to be not much choice in the matter. For people like Peter, like Abigail, like Miriam, they deserved a future free from this. From the toxic, inescapable hierarchy of Panem. And it was his job to fight for it, to clear a future out for them, cut away all the bad like Verger, and let a new world grow in its place, sprouting from nothing. It was worth it, and he couldn't envision a situation where he wouldn't realise that, but that didn't mean it wasn't hard.

A light knock directed their attention to the door, which Georgia was sliding open and stepping through. Her expression was a mask of sympathy once she'd shut it and turned to Will, creeping over to him with nothing but softness in her stance.

“Will,” she said, and it sounded nice coming from someone who wasn't Hannibal. “Are you okay?”

“Never better.”

“I know it isn't easy,” she whispered, seating herself beside them, unfocused in the bluish light of the compartment. “I don't want to go either.”

“But we have to,” Will finished, shaking his head at her. “I know. I know why I'm doing this.”

Her hand came to rest over his, a steady weight above it. The fear was great and trembling, undeniable, slick and clinging to them. Rain that just wouldn't leave, snow that wouldn't melt, sweat they couldn't wash off. But Will had lived weeks with this sort of burden, and so had Georgia. They had been through the arena twice, and survived, twice. They were here, and that counted for something.

“Abigail?” she asked, tender, cautious, and he nodded.

“Always,” was his answer. “It's all for her.”

“I'm fighting for her too, you know,” she said softly, fingers twitching around his, linking them. “We all are. For her, for what she represents.”

“Hope?”

“That. And the future. Everything we could have.” His heart was swelling in pride, in adoration for all that Abigail was, all that she would be. She was the potential of their new Panem, personified. Will wasn't all that much older than her, but he was ten times as

damaged. He didn't think he would live to see the aftermath of this, and the peace it would bring. She would. She deserved to.

“She's my little sister.”

“And she's so much more. She's her own person. She's why we have to *win*.”

“What if we don't?” he murmured, not wanting to hear the answer. He hadn't considered it. He knew, of course, that in all likelihood, they would lose. But what then? Verger destroy all the Districts in retaliation, and have only the Capitol remain, a sealed off utopia with him and the only citizens of Panem that seemed to matter? It wasn't sustainable, but Will wouldn't put it past him. He was that insane.

“Then we die up there, while she lives down here. Then Abigail tries again, another lifetime from now. One day, a rebellion will be successful. It has to be. Maybe she'll be the one leading the next one.”

“She shouldn't have to,” he sighed, and Georgia laughed.

“That's on us,” she responded. “That's on whether or not we win.”

Of course, Abigail's position as a secret beacon of hope for them all didn't appear to be known to her, if the way she dealt with hand-to-hand combat was anything to go by, recklessly blocking blows from Miriam as they danced across the training area together, breathless with their untouched youth. The only ones who laughed during training were people like Hannibal, who drank violence like wine, and those untested in battle.

Foolishly, he had assumed that during dinner, nobody would be here. Appetite had been a thing of the past after Bella had announced that war had commenced this morning, and what better to do than train, considering he'd probably need it in the coming weeks? His assumption had been half-right, since it was practically empty bar for the girls below, visible to him and Georgia from the overlooking balcony. The way Abigail moved was like nothing he had ever seen before, athletic and effortless as she dodged circles around Miriam, who was at least two years her senior. Will had to admit, he would've been impressed, if not for the insurmountable fury pooling in his stomach like acid, hot and sweet and burning his tongue.

With one expert push, Abigail had Miriam on her back, twisting from her grasp and falling motionless, chest chasing breaths. She glanced up, then, eyes catching Will's. They were icy blue and there was blood on her lip and Will felt flashes of the past tear at his brain, urging him to look. Abigail was gazing at him, defiance in her proud posture, the tilt of her chin. He couldn't hear her, but he knew she was saying it:

See?

Chapter 28

“-*completely* irresponsible, I can't believe you would-”

“I'm not a child, Will!”

“Yes you *are*! You're fourteen!”

“I know kids that age that survived the Games!”

“What about this is so hard for you to *understand*?” he shouted, and their voices were arching so high, spiralling down the corridors, and a few doors had peeked open to listen in, the same communal curiosity that had followed them in District Four, too. “*They shouldn't have had to*. That's why we're doing this in the *first place*! So you won't ever have to!”

“I *want* to!”

“Then you're *selfish*,” he spat, and her face twitched in barely concealed rage. “It was *hell*. I was older than you are now, and you know how I felt in that arena? Small. Young. Weak. *Scared*. It's not that I don't respect you, it's not that I don't recognise why you think you need to do this, but *please*. The things I've suffered… I would die before I let them happen to you. And if need be, I intend to. Once this is all over, fight to your heart's content. It'll be your choice. But not now. Wait until all those other kids your age, in all those other Districts, also have a choice. They aren't as lucky as you.”

Harsh as it was, he knew it was true. Abigail wasn't fighting for any *enjoyment:* she wanted to prove herself. She wanted to fight alongside him, an honourable and admirable prospect, but a foolish one. It made him ache in frustration, infuriated that there was a complete misunderstanding on her part about what this was. She had seen him on screen, seen him kill and maim and kiss, but didn't understand why he was so against her fighting. Oh, the naivety of youth. At her age, he remembered he'd had his heart set on sailing. Had begged his mother to let one of the fisherman take him out, wanted to feel the wind in the hair and freedom singing along his fingertips, skimming the waves. He'd wanted to be closer to his father's home, his great love, had been desperate to understand him better.

“Never,” his mother had sworn, and had kept refusing no matter how ardently he begged. Instead, she'd asked the woodworker to whittle him a little wooden ship as a favour, and the presence of the word 'Graham' carved down the side had been enough to shut him up for a month or two. He realised now, he had been insensitive. His father had died out there. To his mother, the sea was not a friendly place, and if it had stolen her husband from her, who was to say it would take her son, too? So despite how he had despised her at the time, she had denied him. Because that had been her job.

And now, it was his.

“Will-”

“I don't want to hear it,” he snapped. “I just. I want you to wait. Please.”

Her nod was reluctant, but noticeable. She seemed more subdued, and he of course felt a little guilty- he didn't *enjoy* seeing her like this. She was his sister. She was fierce and wild and untameable, no longer the timid girl he'd once known, now outspoken and brave; *righteous*, even. They were qualities that were distinctly *her*, and he wouldn't trade them for anything, wouldn't ever want to see them gone. But they were also traits that could end up dangerous. So if he had to trample on them a little to keep her from an untimely death, he would do so, because her safety was more important than any of it.

“Thank you, Abigail,” he murmured, before turning, leaving her alone and small in the corridor, surrounded by the hungry, curious faces of their neighbours. Feeling tiny wasn't fun for anyone, but perhaps if she experienced it once… she might just think twice.

Then again, she was a fourteen year old girl, stuck in a war where she felt nothing but helpless and trapped. He wouldn't count on it.

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Freddie laughed when he told her, discreet and private. It was the first time he'd ever heard her quiet in a crowd. It was the first time he'd seen her in a crowd, really, and not prancing in front of it, mindlessly completing Verger's bidding.

“She really has changed, hasn't she?” she observed, stare aimed at Abigail, sweetly exchanging goodbyes with Beverly on the other side of the room. They had said their goodbyes not minutes ago, and Will was grateful for his conversation with Freddie to distract him from the tears threatening to blur his eyes and the sorrow curling around his heart. “I remember when I first picked out her name. She was shaking like a leaf when she came out of the crowd, I thought she'd faint before she made it on stage.”

“I remember that too.”

“Of course you do,” Freddie breathed. “How could you forget? It was one of the worst days of your life, I suspect. Rivalled with the second reaping. It was only a year after, but I saw it then, already. How she'd grown. It was when your name was read, how her face just… set. Closed off. Like she'd been prepared. Like she'd been saving all her strength just in case. It was a far cry from the trembling mess I'd seen a year earlier. She took her power and wore it like a mask. She reminded me of… well, me.”

“And now?” he questioned, eyes moving to her. She didn't look back to him, only watching Abigail.

“She's nobody but herself,” she murmured, and Will was clutched with exasperated affection for his misguided little sister. It irritated him to no end that she refused to listen to his repeated warnings, but that was all because he loved her, because of how he loved her, with frightening capacity and paralysing force. Wanting to fight was simply a testament to her courage, to the goodness of her character, and it did, in all honesty, make his heart clench in warmth, no matter how it drove him half mad.

The buzz throughout the room was almost unbearable, sending tension curling through Will like electric, panicked and apprehensive. The crowd was thick now, but Will knew as soon as they were required to leave, it would thin. People were here to say goodbye, or they were here to change their minds. A few would allow their cowardice to overpower their bravery. Even if they didn't, however many went, a part of him knew it wouldn't be enough. Verger had the firepower, had the numbers, had the pure insanity to try whatever was necessary to win. Will took him to be a sore loser. They'd endure hell before they came anywhere close to victory.

“Why are you here, Freddie?” he wondered aloud, watching the diverse range of people mill about the room. Freddie sighed beside him, hesitant words waiting on her tongue. When he turned to her, he followed her gaze to the corner of the room, where Alana and Margot stood, talking to one another in soft voices as their hands joined as one.

“Alana really is beautiful, isn't she?”

“Oh,” escaped his mouth, involuntary, as he stared at Alana, dumbstruck. She was beautiful, of course, and he had always thought so. The ivory of her skin, matched with the dark mahogany of her velvet hair, the delicate curl of her features: she was the picture of classic beauty. If Hannibal weren't in the picture, then perhaps… It wouldn't be returned, seeing as she was a lot older than him and was quite clearly taken, but the thought of her in a romantic sense wasn't impossible. It wasn't exactly shocking that Margot wasn't the only one who loved her. “You two…? I thought… Margot?”

“Has been with her for the better part of a decade,” Freddie answered. “And has made her unquestionably happy. With Alana and I… there's no 'we' to speak of. Never has been. She has no idea I want her.”

“*Oh*,” he whispered, a lot more making sense. He'd never taken Alana as someone to betray the ones she loved, and it was a relief to hear so. Still, it can't have been easy for Freddie. “Sorry.”

“It's okay,” she replied, monotone, seemingly at peace with these feelings Will hadn't known existed until a minute ago. Either that, or she was just fantastic at concealing her pain. If so, Will could most certainly relate.

“How long?” he enquired, soft.

“I think it was your first year, actually,” she admitted, and Will was taken back to another time. Looking back, he seemed so young. A lot had changed, in those few weeks. They had felt like months. “I suppose we were all set on different paths, that year.”

“And here we all are,” Will remarked, “together.”

“It's funny how things end up,” she whispered, and he felt an odd tenderness toward her. Nothing on the level of that for Abigail or Beverly, or even Georgia, but a tenderness nonetheless. She had been a constant inevitability in his life these past years, and although they had never been close, she wasn't all bad. She was here, after all. Willing to fight for the right thing.

“Did you think things would be different? That you'd be with her?”

“Not with her. Just… wherever she was.”

“I know the feeling.”

“You don't,” she said sharply. “You really, really don't. You got your happy ending, but not everyone does. I didn't. Life is a little more complicated than that.”

Whether it was the words themselves or her tone as she said them, it made his teeth grind in annoyance. As if unrequited love were the greatest tragedy one could suffer; Will had experienced worse in his short eighteen years than she had in her thirty or so. He'd been forced into the Games, twice, had been threatened and tortured, whipped and beaten, nearly raped, imprisoned and terrorised, had lived a life of fear and deprivation and known nothing else.

“I know all about the complications of life,” he hissed icily, finally drawing her attention away from Alana. Apology was written all over her face, but it was too late to take it back. “Just so you know, *Freddie*, we aren't even together anymore. But it doesn't matter. Nobody gets a happy ending, not in this world. We'll be lucky if we get an ending at *all*. If Verger gets to us, he'll keep us alive for months, maybe even *years*, and make us suffer. But keep worrying about Alana being the worst of your problems, by all means.”

She looked as if she were about to say sorry, expression shifted in sheepish regret, but people had started moving. The crowd was pushing toward the door, slowly but surely. It was time to go, and petty disagreements, he supposed, didn't really mean a thing. They were on the same side, weren't they? And wasn't that all that mattered?

“Will-”

“Forget it. You should probably queue up.”

Silence stretched between them, and he kept his eyes fixed on the far door, where Bella and Jack were ushering people through. It would only be a step through the door, a short set of stairs, and then they would be at the entrance to the outside world. To the beautiful graveyard growing upon the corpses of their ancestors. When he looked to the side, she was gone, which was likely for the best. The air to his side felt cold.

In front of him, Jack waved Brian and Jimmy through the door with a wary eyebrow raised, rightfully cautious. They had come from the midst of the Capitol, technically, and to Jack, they were shallow idiots at best and dangerous spies at worst. But Will remembered, through a drunken haze, the words Brian had said to him. He recalled the passionate sincerity behind them, and how Will had felt some strange kinship with this peculiar Capitol resident, and even a gratitude, in some ways. He'd feel honoured to have them beside him throughout this, for them to have a hand in resurrecting a new society from the remains of whatever was left after all of this. They had earned the right, in Will's opinion.

Next went Hannibal and Chiyoh, moving with more purpose than anybody here, elegantly drifting through the door to a future they would likely have a large impact on. Hannibal's

mysterious ties to the rebellion even before he had met Will gave him the indication that this was one of those rare situations where he truly cared about the outcome. There was still so much Will didn't know about him. How had he come across Thirteen? How had he kept in contact with them? Why had he never told Will? Questions to ask if they both survived, he supposed. Which was unlikely, but it gave him something to live for, for a little while.

The door loomed ever-closer, dragging Beverly and Georgia through in a matter of seconds, and then it was him. Jack was a friendly familiarity, and Bella the opposite, a frightening reminder of the high stakes of what they were about to do. Lives were at risk. Panem was at risk. Jack gripped his shoulder as he brushed past, earnest and severe. He looked tired.

“See you on the other side, Will.”

Chapter 29

Following in the footsteps of their wild journey to District 12, traversing over hills and throughout wood after wood, they came face to face with its ruins only a few days into the trip. Will felt the pain spike in his heart like it was yesterday, and realised that he hadn't really felt it at all, back then. He'd been delirious and running for his life. Now, the true damage could be seen, and it was immense. Tears stung his eyes as his gaze traced the rubble-strewn streets that people had once walked down, the collapsed building that families had once lived in, the charred remains of the square in the distance that had represented nothing but the horrors of the Games for thousands of children throughout the years. The air still smelt vaguely burnt, and the District was almost entirely covered by a layer of soot, looking almost identical to that of Thirteen, before life had flourished above it. One day, District 12 would be reborn from the ashes, grow into all it could've been if it had simply been allowed to be free, just like Thirteen. It hurt, however, that it might take another seventy five years for that to happen.

At the sight before them, a few people gasped, and there were several anguished cries, but most stayed silent in their shock. All of this, gone. Verger's power was immeasurable. What could their small band of fighters possibly have to offer that would beat a force like this? Hope, Will supposed, wasn't entirely redundant. Perhaps their deaths would martyr them, would inspire an entire new generation of rebels, and maybe they would be good enough. Maybe one day, someone would be good enough. Because once Verger went, another tyrant would simply take over, potentially more dangerous than his predecessor. Will likely wouldn't be alive to see that, but he wanted to prevent it from happening. For all of his friends that would still be alive. For all those innocents from the Districts. For Abigail.

His goodbye to her had been briefer than he'd liked, but then any length of time would still not have been enough. Hours could've passed, and he would still be standing her thinking only of her, missing her, feeling as though there had been more to say. But with the time he'd had, there was only so much he could do.

“I love you,” he'd said, “more than anything.”

“I know,” she'd murmured. “Me too.”

Her arms around his torso had felt like home, and the silk of her hair under his palm had been enough to fight the temptation to stay, sit by her side until it was all over, for better or for worse. She was the reason he was doing this, after all, the reason he had to be strong enough to leave her behind. So he'd kissed her on the forehead, lingering, lost, and blinked away the prick of tears in his eyes.

“If I don't...”

“Don't,” she'd interrupted. “I don't want to consider it.”

“You should,” he'd replied. “You need to. If I don't come back, Abigail… be happy, okay?”

“Never,” she'd vowed, eyes boring into his, determined, fire so hot it burned as blue as her eyes. “Of all the things you could ask me. Not that, please. Because I could never be. Not if you were gone.”

“You must,” he'd instructed. “Or I die for nothing.”

Frustration in the lines of her face, she'd stared him down. It was always something she'd been able to do, even as that demure little girl she'd been before, able to twist her big brother around her finger like it was nobody's business. He'd be buying her dreamcatchers made of driftwood and taking her on trips to the beach before he knew it, unable to deny her anything. And then, after, she'd weasel it out of him effortlessly: he hadn't slept well the night before because of nightmares, he was daydreaming about Hannibal instead of eating his breakfast, he hadn't spoken to Beverly because she reminded him of it all. But this time, he hadn't relented. His sister may have been a force to be reckoned with, but nothing matched his love for her, his desire to keep her safe, the way he would fight, always, to keep her alive.

So this once, for the first time in a while, she did as she was told. She nodded, and peace had settled in him. She hadn't been lying. He'd know. Now he had some comfort amongst this raging war: Abigail wouldn't only be safe if he died, but she would be happy.

And so he marched on.

“It's just through here,” Chilton was saying, leading them through the burnt roads, amongst the unstable remnants of houses. How ironic it would be if they died here, crushed by the debris that Verger had intended to kill them weeks ago.

“This had better be genuine,” Jack replied, filled with vitriol, as they filed onto what was left of the train station platform. The tracks were empty, but Chilton had assured them that his contacts in the Capitol wouldn't let him down. The train would be here, he said. It wouldn't be up to Capitol standard, but it would arrive. All they could do was trust him. Without transport, they'd be lost, wandering for weeks, months, until they finally made it to the Capitol, weak and weary, no fight left in them to actually fulfil their mission.

“What do you think?” came Georgia"s whisper in his ear, as her and Beverly pressed up beside him, worry etched into their expressions and doubt in their eyes. “Are we about to die?”

“We've made it this far- who's to say we won't survive?”

“Mason Verger?”

“Mason Verger isn't here,” he responded, ignoring the voice in his head that said *he had been*. For all he knew, Verger hadn't even been in that hovercraft. It was just his touch that had been here, reducing an entire District to dust. “We're going to him. That's when we'll die, I think.”

“I wish I could disagree,” Bev whispered, forlorn, but not fearful. They all knew they would die- it wasn't news. Most had simply accepted it, feeling that it was better to die with dignity rather than desperate terror.

Will felt, personally, that the worst part of it all was how many would die. There were likely to be a few unnecessary casualties along the way, like those caught up in the destruction of District 12, but even the loss of those fighting willingly was a tragedy. The platform was crowded, swamped with those who were here because they believed in freedom. All good people, putting their lives on the line for a concept, for a pipe dream. Will was only here due to his personal stakes. If he had never volunteered, if he had never met Hannibal and never been changed forever more, would he be standing here? Theoretically, would he be as desperate to rage against the Capitol as Abigail seemed to be?

He didn't think so.

He'd be waiting at home, waiting for it all to unfold so he could go back to his simple, unaffected life, wanting the sea but rarely touching it, missing his father but never speaking of him, seeing the house next door everyday and feeling ill for some great, unknown reason that even now, he didn't know. Did that mean this experience had changed him for the better? If it had, would dying mean that none of it was worth anything?

“Scared?” Brian asked, hand tangled tightly in Jimmy's as they approached. If Will shut his eyes, maybe he could imagine that the station around them was all in one piece and that they were years in the future, taking the train simply because they *wanted* to. A fun day out, that was all.

“Terrified,” he confessed, voice quiet, because of course he was. Waiting on certain death wasn't enjoyable, not for anybody. He was walking to his death. He was *taking the train to his death*. He felt sixteen all over again, feeling younger and more tiny than ever, convinced that he was on the last train he'd ever ride, breathing the last air he ever would. He was the son of a fisherman, and not at all had he been prepared for the fearsome competition of the Hunger Games: he would die, he was sure of it. Except now most of that competition was dead and he was here, ready to face the President and whatever he had in store for them. Talk about a plot twist.

“Do you think it'll be worth it?” Jimmy questioned, and received four quizzical looks in return. “Dying, I mean. Will it be worth it?”

“If you're dying for what you believe in, yes,” Bev answered, and nobody could say anything in return, could only stand in silence, the words dancing hauntingly in their brains. “And I know I am. I know what this choice is, what I might be sacrificing. I won't regret it.”

“I don't think I've ever been so close to death,” he remarked in reply, eyes trailing to the train tracks, words distant. Will envied him, in that moment. Living in the Capitol would be a despicable existence, he knew, surrounded by ignorance and bloodthirsty enthusiasm, but at least he wouldn't go hungry. At least he wouldn't know the cold hands of Death, the chill of its breath, always so close on the nape of his neck. “Do you think it'll hurt?”

“Depends how you go.” An awkward silence befell upon them, and something about Bev's short breaths told him that she wasn't done speaking. They all knew that the death that awaited them wasn't likely to be a peaceful one. “It probably won't be pretty, not if you're up against Verger. So yeah, I think it'll hurt.”

Hesitation rung throughout the air, but not regret. It wasn't as if they hadn't considered the possibility of this, of dying. Will had, visions of darkness spinning through his mind in the night, a permanent fixture since his first brush with death all those years ago. But for those who hadn't lived a life like this… it must have been frightening. Jimmy opened his mouth to speak once more, but his voice was cut short by the grinding screams of machinery in the distance, trudging along toward them. Sparks of fear flew in Will's stomach, burning low and heavy. The train sounded like nothing he'd heard before, used to the smooth glide of those sent from the Capitol, soundless and elegant, the epitome of riches.

Then soon, in the far distance, steam. Those on the platform watched quietly as Fate approached, old and rusted, chugging along slower than expected. Will's heart dropped further with every second, wishing inexplicably for Hannibal by his side, for his hand clasped in his. The end was creeping closer, and it didn't feel quite right to let it encompass him while Hannibal stood mere metres away, determinedly not glancing across the platform to Will. But that was for the train.

When the small hovercraft set down behind them, unnoticed until now, spraying ash and waste, their eyes found one another instantly. Hannibal looked shocked, *scared,* and Will felt his hackles rise, suspicion pooling in his throat.

“Your contacts had access to a hovercraft?” Will heard Jack ask, faint, and heard Chilton's confused and unintelligible reply, and knew.

Something wasn't right.

Turning and pushing past Georgia, Will felt the push of air where the hovercraft landed, a wave of rushing wind, sending his hair flying back from his face and stinging his cheeks. He felt movement beside him, and knew it was Hannibal, the shift of the air to accommodate his body all too familiar. Fingers brushed the back of his hand, and it was all he needed not to panic. He could hear the train pulling to a stop behind them, an air-splitting screech piercing the air as it slowed on the tracks, sending ripples of conversation throughout the crowd. One voice rose above the others, a voice that was sickeningly familiar, young and clear, inciting the cold grip of fear that curled around his heart.

“Will-”

Twisting round, following the voice, he caught a glimpse of sapphire eyes and fair skin. Heard a shot ringing out, singing and sailing through the silence, chased by the noises of a thump, a painful wail.

Then, nothing.

Chapter 30

When Will awoke, he was trussed upside down like an animal, Hannibal swinging beside him. The buzz and hustle of the truck they were in sent him swaying uncomfortably, poised in mid-air. He had the sudden urge to turn to Hannibal, drink in the sight of him and quench his thirst, but their positions disallowed it, left him lonely and cramped, adjacent to him. His only relief came from when the truck jostled them enough so they brushed against one another, hair tickling cheeks and fingernails touching arms. A sigh would escape him every time, involuntary. The hours passed long enough that he felt as if he'd lost the concept of time altogether, feeling almost at peace, after a while.

All peace came to an end eventually.

The truck screeched to a halt so suddenly that they would've been thrown forward if not tied to the ceiling railings of the vehicle. Everything was still for a few moments as doors slammed somehwere behind them, supposedly the movements of the drivers as they went about their business. Then, their doors, the only thing separating them from the outside world, were hauled open, exposing them to the bright air on the other side. For a few seconds, it was all an inconsequential blur, that slowly but surely adjusted. Through the strain and bloodrush to his head, he could see the hazy figure of Verger approaching them, just the wrong way up. His vision was still clear enough that he could see that Verger was in a wheelchair, however.

Hannibal's fault, he supposed. One could induce all sorts of horrors with an attack on the right set of nerves.

“Gentlemen,” was Verger's introduction, smug, calculated. Will wanted more than anything to see him unhinge, break down his stoicism and hear him scream in agony, the same way he had done to Will, time and time again. He deserved it. “You should see your faces.”

“We're a little… tied up, if you didn't notice,” Hannibal replied, the picture of composure, and Will couldn't prevent himself from throwing an irritated side-eye his way. Of all people, it wasn't surprising for Hannibal to make jokes when faced with near-certain death. His arrogance really was something to behold.

“Oh, I did. I ordered it, in fact,” Verger shot back, menace curving the lines of his face to make way for a sick smile, one that was burned into Will's memory with startling clarity. “You should've seen *their* faces, when we took you. The shock! The horror! They're on their way right now, under the impression that they might be able to get here in time to save you. I pity the fools, really.”

“Chilton betrayed us?” Hannibal enquired, somehow only managing to sound slightly curious, rather than utterly betrayed like Will did. It was ten times the amount of how he'd felt at Gideon's treachery, which they really all should've seen coming a mile away.

“Oh no, not Chilton. His contact here in the Capitol. Without his candor, you may not be here,” Verger was saying, conversational, as his brutes circled them like sharks, hands

fiddling with the ropes that were holding them up. Will couldn't deny the ease of panic he felt, however, at Verger's admission. Chilton hadn't betrayed them. Chilton had been brave, had stayed loyal and helped them, had- “Chilton's dead now.”

The shot.

If Will shut his eyes, he could see the shock on Chilton's face in that interview all over again, the naive surprise as Will had been tackled to the floor. Will was almost completely sure that he had been nothing but a fickle Capitol resident, unaware of what he was getting himself into when he signed on to help the rebellion. Will certainly hadn't held much respect for him, but he hadn't deserved to die.

The weight of another death on his hands rested on his heart as they were cut down, making them feel sticky with blood despite their cleanliness. The feeling remained as they were strapped to handcarts and wheeled throughout the horrifyingly familiar corridors of Verger's mansion. The tall, whitewashed walls, towering over him like a scene straight from one of his nightmares. Hannibal looked entirely unimpressed, as usual, but Will knew his own face was stuck in an expression of wild fear. Even with the comical effect of Hannibal's odd positioning, stiff and awkward, he couldn't melt away the terror frosting his insides. It didn't seem like all that long ago that he had been rescued from here, but perhaps that had been pointless. If he were to die here, then what was the use in being saved in the first place?

Even now, in the belly of the beast, on death's doorstep, he couldn't be at peace. Her safety was always tiptoeing across his brain, the worry for it, ambushing him during any brief moments of freedom from violence and distress. It wouldn't be surprising if Verger decided to use her against him, she was the perfect weapon, after all. His perfect weakness. But all of that was to come:

Now, he had a dinner to attend.

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Blood painted his lips like lead, thick and heavy, dripping from his mouth. He was no stranger to its taste, but he had to confess that he'd never had it in such quantity before, feeling as though he could drink it down like water, or like wine, if he so wanted. He didn't. He wasn't thirsty, not at the moment. Instead, he spat it onto the plate before him, expelling the tang from his mouth with a wet cough, feeling it drip down his chin like messy teardrops, coating the shirt he was wearing. Cordell was stumbling backward, a great bear, clutching his cheek with a pained howl, and Will found himself turning to Hannibal, for once the one doing the asking: *have I done well? Are you proud?*

The sheer force of Hannibal's love as he beamed at Will was answer enough, the face of a man not only humbled, but entranced. There was some free and giddy smile that was spread across his face, saccharine in its wide set. Hannibal rarely smiled so helplessly, and when he did, it was always reserved for Will and Will alone. They were enough to make Will melt, smiling lovingly in return. But this. It was overwhelming, awe-inspiring, to be on the receiving end of, so much so that Will couldn't even bring himself to smile in response, feeling quite weak in the knees at the sight. The pure and unfiltered joy in Hannibal's eyes. The dazed, half-drunk looseness of his mouth. The youthful sweetness of his blushing

cheeks. It made him look softer, especially in this dim yellow light that Will recognised all too well, knew from those long, trance-like months he had spent here. It was almost romantic in this room, as opposed to the cells, because here he was sat along a table being gazed at by his love, gazed at like he'd hung every and each of the stars one by one, had felt them burn in his palms and shine on his face. It was a stark contrast to the empty chill on his cell, alone, eternal.

This mansion was a terrifying reminder of it all, but this time, Hannibal was here, enough comfort to keep him from going completely insane. Hannibal would protect him, he knew. Could tell from the eager adoration on his face and the way he was angled toward Will entirely, dumbstruck with affection. To reduce such a man, such a monster, to such weakness…

It was quite the ego boost.

“No pajama party for you, Mr Graham,” Verger was saying, sounding thoroughly disappointed, but Will still hadn't looked at him. His eyes were fixed on Hannibal, who was staring back at him in turn, quite ridiculously lovestruck. Will was high off the power of it all, the intoxicating rush of dominance. If they were anywhere else, and if Will could move more than one of his arms, he would launch himself across the table and kiss him, feel the hot press of his tongue and the familiar warmth of his want.

“I'm sure I'll manage,” was Will's hoarse reply, as he finally turned to Verger, challenge burning in his eyes, copper blood on his lips. Snaking his tongue out, he could taste it all over again, salty-sweet, addictive.

“Maybe for a little while,” Verger sneered. “Maybe briefly, while your friends rush to the Capitol on that pathetic excuse for a train they're riding, believing that they might have a chance to save you. But we both know, don't we Will? You won't survive the night.”

Night. At least that was a hope. It had been the early hours of the morning as they had stood on the platform, the grey dawn sweeping the sky. If they were especially lucky, the train would be arriving in the night, perhaps even soon enough to save them. But then, Verger had a point. The train was no Capitol invention, all sleek power and streamlined speed. It was old and decrepit, and it would perhaps take days for them to reach the Capitol while travelling in it. There was a strong possibility that he and Hannibal would, in fact, die.

If that was the only way to keep Abigail safe…

“Neither will you,” Will whispered, quite spontaneously, and watched his face twist in frustrated fury, listened as he turned to Cordell and barked his mindless, crazed orders. There was a part of Will that had gone numb, because it was pretty pointless feeling scared, now. Death was finally here, just as he had been expecting all these years. It was a little late, but it was here now. For both of them.

Glancing to Hannibal, he looked into the deep blackness of his eyes, shining obsidian in the candlelight.

They'd had a good run.

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Hannibal simply blinked as as Cordell pushed forward with the iron, expression barely shifting as his skin sizzled agonisingly. Will remembered all too well as it had been forced upon Margot, how she had cried, how *he* had cried, desperately wishing for it all to end, for someone to save her. Now, it was a little different. Hannibal looked nothing like she had, pinned under Verger's knees, trapped and victimised. If anything, Hannibal almost appeared to be the one in control here, a near-smirk on his face as he inhaled the smell of his own burning flesh, nostrils flaring imperceptibly.

Will had seen him weep, seen him sick with his own love, besotted, seen him gasp and arch under Will's own hands. And yet, the intensity of a red-hot iron couldn't even spark a wince from him. If it was Will holding the iron, was his reaction be different?

Would he cry? Scream?

Moan?

“Mason would've preferred to brand your face,” Cordell purred, predatory, and Will tuned out the rest of his words, bewitched by the stoicism braced on Hannibal's face, the flicker of his eyelashes, casting shadows on his cheeks.

“It's very important to Mason that I have the pig's experience,” Hannibal uttered, sounding quite curious. A bitter pang of jealousy rang through Will's stomach, and he was hit with a frantic impulse to draw Hannibal's attention back to him, drag his eyes back to Will with an especially coy look or an accidental slip of the shirt. He could, if he wanted.

If he wanted.

The mere thought of Hannibal as a pig nearly sent him into fits of laughter, shocked by the insinuation. Hannibal was many things, but pig-like wasn't one of them. Eccentric, wanton, sickeningly in love. But a pig? No, never. Will had seen him so often as an animal, looming and vicious, but in those especially lurid fantasies, he was always a carnivore of the greatest proportions. A lion with bared teeth, a provoked bear, a hungry shark.

Pigs simply weren't bloodthirsty enough.

“You aren't a pig,” he reiterated later, undoing the ropes that bound Hannibal so tightly.

They hadn't been thrown into the cells tonight, a gesture that Will was grateful for. He didn't want to go back there. He didn't want Hannibal to see it, the ruins of what had been his only home for months on end. His memory of it now was likely becoming vague and Will would prefer it to remain that way, nothing but a distant haze in his mind, rather than the vivid nightmare chamber it was for Will.

He supposed Verger's motivations were different. He probably just hadn't seen the point, since he'd probably be returning to them in an hour or so, more torture to bestow upon them. Instead, he'd tied Hannibal up like a pig and pushed Will down next to him, who's shaking

fingers were now doing their best to undo the tightly wound knots restraining Hannibal's arms and neck.

“I know,” Hannibal said softly. “He is.”

“He did this to Margot, you know,” Will muttered, fingertips brushing the brand and sending a visible shiver down Hannibal's spine. “Sorry,” he added, wrenching his hand away and going back to work on the fraying rope.

“Don't apologise,” Hannibal rasped. He took another breath, calming, before he spoke again. “Was it disturbing, to see it again?”

“It was horrific,” Will admitted, finally pulling the rope free on one of Hannibal's bindings, who used his now-free hand to help with the other. “He told me last time that I would get a turn. I suspect that's tonight.”

“I won't let him touch you,” Hannibal hissed, hands finally loose, which he used to seize Will's face in a fit of panic. “I'll die before he touches you.”

His eyes were dark and intense, which wasn't uncommon when it concerned Will. His expression was determined and wild, and it reminded Will of all those days ago in District 12, when he had been so sure he was about to die. Probably would have, if it weren't for Hannibal. He'd fainted and been carried to safety, so tenderly, and in his dreams he sometimes thought he could remember the protective clasp that Hannibal had wound him in, the selfless resolve as he had marched onwards, breaths laboured and quivering, bombs exploding all around them. Then, of course, Will would wake up.

Typical.

This wasn't a dream, though, not anymore, and Will was here today because Hannibal had refused to let him die. Perhaps it was unhealthy, how Hannibal viewed Will as a possession that he didn't want taken from him, the way he saw him as *his* and surrendered himself as Will's. Perhaps it was unhealthy how Will had let him for so long, entertained his ridiculous romantic idealisations, had even revelled in them, at some points.

Perhaps.

But then…

Hannibal's lips were also irritatingly free of blood, and those other issues couldn't quite be dealt with so promptly. So to rectify the problem, Will kissed him.

Chapter 31

“I thought we couldn't do this anymore?” Hannibal asked, half-murmured against Will's mouth.

“That doesn't really seem to matter now.”

“Because we're about to die?”

“Because I love you,” Will said, and watched a smile slip across Hannibal's face, serene joy set in his expression. “Because you're mine.”

“Is this temporary?” Hannibal asked, a whisper of pain, and Will felt a sliver of guilt curl in his stomach. Last time, when they had nearly died, surrounded by burning ruins, Will had kissed him and never mentioned it again. Hannibal, ever the gentleman, had followed his lead and kept his distance, refraining from bringing it up. But clearly, he had wanted to. In an entirely rare display of vulnerability, he appeared to be concerned that this didn't mean anything.

“No,” Will replied, so sure, pressing his thumb against Hannibal's lips, feeling the prick of his teeth press against his flesh. “If we survive then this is forever, Hannibal. Like it always should've been.”

Hannibal kissed him again, dislodging his thumb, and Will came home. Life seemed to spring from where their mouths met, bright and real, the sweet coming of spring. It didn't matter that they were locked in a pig-pen like swine, not while they kissed as if the end of the world waited only on the other side of the door. This was all that mattered. Right here, right now, the taste of blood flooding his mouth the more he moved his tongue against Hannibal's. How could he ever have thought they'd be better parted?

The kiss, it was pure, surrendering devotion. It was what all these years had been leading up to, a bloody press of mouths under the glaring light of Verger's mansion. It was theirs, primal and perfect.

Perhaps he should've seen this coming, that fateful day when they had met eyes across a room that had at first felt miles long, but had shrunken down to millimetres as the suffocating intrigue of Hannibal's gaze had squeezed in around him. Hannibal had been nothing more than an opponent back then, an enemy, but there had been a heaviness to the way he'd looked at Will that he hadn't understood until over a year later, kissed like his life depended upon it under an inky expanse of stars.

“If I saw you everyday forever, Will, I would remember this time,” Hannibal was saying, stricken love falling like rain from his tongue, eyes glowing like fireflies in the dim, mouth parted in rapture. Will felt delirious from it all, the weight of the heady emotions spilling between them and the inevitability of whatever was to come.

Death? Or an entirely new life?

“I feel as though I haven't seen you in an age,” Will admitted, nosing against Hannibal's temple, feeling him sigh and deflate against him, giving himself over to the gentle cage of Will's arms. “It's like I've been staring at afterimages of you in places you haven't been in years.”

“I know the feeling,” Hannibal mumbled in response, muffled against Will's neck. “After those first Games, I had to adjust to not having you in my daily life. It was harder than I'd imagined. I'd dream of you and wake with your name on my lips.”

“You and me both. In District Four… I looked up at the night sky there,” he began. “Orion above the horizon and, near it, Jupiter. I wondered if you could see it, too. I wondered if our stars were the same.”

“I believe some of our stars will always be the same,” Hannibal whispered, and Will thought of all the times he'd torn the library apart searching for anything, everything he could know. Evidently, with Hannibal's deep pool of knowledge, the District 1 library had been more heavily stocked. Will always dreamed of the stars, however, and had always seen them in Hannibal's eyes, so dark they matched the reign of night. “That was a long time ago, now. Where does the difference between the past and the future come from?”

“Mine?” Will asked. “Before you and after you. Yours? It's all starting to blur. Like you and I.”

“We're conjoined,” Hannibal said, words from an eternity ago, words that Will had said to him. There was some great rush of burning affection in his lungs as he pulled back to kiss Hannibal once more, feeling as if he'd inhaled a great bout of smoke and was promptly choking on it.

It often felt like this, with Hannibal. His love was so big, so deep, an endless ocean, and whenever Will truly looked at him it felt like he was drowning, lost in a sea of emotion so big that he didn't think he'd ever find air, wouldn't ever *want* air. One could adapt to live underwater, he supposed. Clearly it was possible to live at the heart of a fire, feeding off the embers like blood, kissing away the flames, all life and light and love.

“Isn't this *romantic*?” came a sudden exclamation, the heavy doors having swung open without either of them noticing, too caught up in each other, wrapped up in the feverish euphoria that came with being in love. Verger was grinning at them, looking suspiciously satisfied for someone who'd just found his playthings enjoying themselves thoroughly instead of in immense pain, like he'd been intending, Will assumed, with all the threats and torture. Then again, Verger was insane. Many of his motives were still a mystery to Will. “Young love. Such a tragedy to see it end.”

Will only looked at him in barely concealed fear, and he was surprised to hear that Hannibal didn't have a smart answer either, instead staying quiet with his head bowed. His hand, however, was tightly knit into Will's, clutching so hard it almost hurt. Will clung back.

“Your friends are here,” Verger offered, taking a dramatic wheel closer to the pen they were cramped up in, a burgeoning smirk curling his lips. “A train has been spotted in the distance. Finally. Who else do you think you'll lose tonight, Mr Graham?”

“I suppose that's up to you,” he muttered, and Verger laughed at him. He reached into his pocket, smugness simply radiating off of him, and produced a very familiar-looking syringe. It was, predictably, filled with that very same amber liquid that he recalled from all those months, remembering oh so well how the point of a needle would send him spiralling into neon dreams filled with demons, stomach dropping from under him.

“Recognise something?” Verger asked, taunting. Will worried his terror would spill straight into the air, it was so great.

“You know I do,” he whispered, and Hannibal's hand pinched around his even tighter. Hannibal could promise all he wanted, but he had no power here. He couldn't protect Will, however much he may have wanted to. Will's words were a sick reminder of this: he hadn't been able to protect him all those months, where he had endured all sorts of horrors, so what was different now?

“We're going to have some fun, Mr Graham,” Verger's voice sung out. He tutted, rolling quite happily over to the pen, teetering over the edge, peering down at them. His hand stretched down to tilt up Will's head. “Don't look so glum. Haven't you missed me?”

“*Don't*-” Hannibal growled, hand tearing from Will's as he lunged at Verger, a predator ready to pounce, anger clearly ignited by the finger Verger had resting under his chin, springing forth.

Will felt the force of Hannibal knock into his side on his reckless path to Verger, felt the sting of a needle in his neck, uneven, and everything went dark.

***

It was always hard to differentiate between dream and reality, when he was in this state.

Drugs swimming in his brain didn't exactly make for a coherent grasp on things, and with his overactive imagination always spinning tales of stags and the sea, it was easy to feel half-mad as he drifted further into delirium, Cordell's heavy hands holding him down against his table of torture, a place that he'd never wanted to return to. It was exactly as he remembered, fluorescent glare and all. He wondered if anyone had been here, since he was.

If they had, he wondered if Verger had wished it was him under the blade. Had Verger missed *him*?

“You'll be sure to let me know if this hurts, won't you?” Cordell was saying- mocking, really. The thing about the amber liquid, whatever it was: it didn't numb pain. Will had spent a lot of time in this room, screaming his lungs out while Verger had his fun, all the while under the influence of some fairly intense drugs. Every prod, every hit, every last press of a weapon upon his body, he'd felt. Could *still* feel, if he shut his eyes and just imagined, let himself be taken back there. Here he was, about to experience it all over again.

Except this time, he wouldn't survive it.

Stars burst behind his eyelids as he squeezed them shut, going willingly into the black endlessness that was waiting for him. A part of him wished Hannibal were here, hand clasped in his, but that would mean he'd have to go through the same, which was the last thing Will wanted for him. Instead, Will knew Verger would've kept him close, potentially even in the next room, just so he could hear the screams, and know there was nothing he could do about it. Verger knew exactly how to undo them, how to pierce them right in the heart. It was one of his many talents.

“Haven't you missed me?” he was saying in Will's head, over and over again, rattling around in there, completely unshakeable. Will knew Hannibal would think it to be so rude, so *vulgar*, to torment in such a classless way. Verger knew not of subtlety, an art form that Hannibal had mastered at a young age, a craft that he kept on hand at all times.

“Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me,” Hannibal had said to him once, speaking of Verger, whispered into the dark space between their bodies one night. Will had paused, mind weighing his next words.

“Are you thinking about eating him?” he'd wondered aloud, hesitant to even ask, afraid to upset Hannibal. But Hannibal had chuckled, the weight of him beside Will shaking with it, and whether he was laughing at the words or Will's tone of voice as he'd said them, Will didn't know.

“Whenever feasible, one should always try to eat the rude,” Hannibal had murmured in reply, and it had startled a childish laugh from Will in return, one he had buried in the jut of Hannibal's clavicle, living off the closeness to him, drunk on it.

“Free-range rude,” he'd remarked, and the two of them had broken out into giggles, so loud in the previous hush. It was moments like those, pure and unfiltered in their raw intimacy, that Will missed. That Will wished they'd had more of, not pushed into inescapable situations like those of the arena, beaten and bloody and bruised every new day, terrified for the sun to rise, terrified for it to set.

“I love you,” Hannibal had breathed, sentiment too great to hide, too full. When Will had kissed him, he had felt him strain toward him, worship on his lips and want on his tongue. He had loved him then, and he loved him now.

Blood smeared along the curve of his jaw, the flat, impassive line of his mouth, the bridge of his nose. Bruises beginning to mottle around his eyes, along the bones of his cheeks. He was so beautiful in brutality; it was where Will had truly found him, and sometimes, it was where he wanted to keep him, a bloodied beast willing to do Will's bidding. On shaky legs, he stumbled toward Hannibal, head spinning, open wounds dotted across his body. His shirt was ripped open, torn, as was the skin under it. Hannibal, in contrast, was hanging from the ceiling, arms restrained in a straitjacket. Verger had used the very same one on Will, once, had hung him here from the rafters, dangling meat over his hungry pigs. Hannibal wasn't far enough out to be threatened with that, but it was only a matter of time. This, he understood.

What he didn't understand, was why he was entirely free, while Hannibal was bound.

Still didn't understand, even as Verger pressed the knife into his palm, gave him a pat on the back like he was a small child who needed encouragement.

“I've muzzled the dog,” Verger said, “now you need to put it down.”

Now he understood.

“I won't,” he said bravely, without any need for thought, voice wavering only a little. “You'll have to kill me first.”

“Oh, Will,” Verger laughed “We won't have to kill *you*!”

With that, he pushed his wheelchair down the ramp to the platform, hitting a button on the stair rail that projected a vast blue screen onto the opposite wall, divided into tiny little boxes. In the boxes, tiny little people were being thrown to the floor and launching themselves at one another, blood spatters flying, blurring their view. Through the confusion, Will squinted, realising that he recognised a few of them. They were cameras.

Thirteen were here.

Verger began to laugh, louder and louder, reaching a crescendo as he decided to blow one box up to the full screen, a simple flick of his fingers doing the trick. Technology worked wonders in the Capitol. This specific camera showed a lone figure, hood pulled over their head, creeping down one of the corridors suspiciously. Will wasn't quite sure of the significance, even as they reached the doors, even as Verger theatrically backed up against the wall beside them with a mocking finger to his lips, sending streaks of blood-wet hands through Will's head, but then, of course.

Someone burst in, knife clutched in their hand, but Verger was faster, grabbing them by the arms, sending the knife clattering to the floor. The force of it had the hood falling back, revealing fair skin and a river of chestnut hair, cerulean eyes sparking in fear. A knife rose to her throat as she was practically manoeuvred onto Verger's knee.

“The choice is yours, Mr Graham,” he uttered, amusement dripping from his tone. “Kill Hannibal, or I kill your sister.”

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Abigail had first been brought into their house, she had cried all night. Her wails had matched with the howling wind, the thunderstorm outside their bedroom window rivalling her noise. Will had never seen this side of her, the helpless infancy, had only witnessed the picture perfect little beauty that the Hobbs family had presented to the world. It frightened him, a little. She was as interchangeable as the weather. She could be a sunshine smile one day, and a screaming gale the next. In the end, after hours of it, he'd crawled across the space between their beds toward her, had let his hand come to rest on her arm, turning her toward him.

“It's okay,” Will had comforted, hand trailing through her soft hair, watching her tear-filled eyes glance up at him. “You're safe here.”

“Want my mom,” she'd whimpered, the fresh age of two not yet old enough for her to string proper sentences together, and his heart had ached for her.

“She's gone,” he'd whispered, recalling the scene he'd come across that very morning, poor Mrs Hobbs limp on her porch with a ring of blood around her neck like a string of pearls. “I'm sorry.”

Abigail hadn't understood, had simply shaken her head and asked for her again, tears still spilling from her misty eyes. Will had barely understood himself, but he'd known that any hope of her revival was lost, and that Abigail belonged here now, with him. Her innocence reminded him of the river, inexplicably. Its everlasting flow, how it was cold to the touch at first but grew warmer, the way it felt like coming home when he saw it, peeking through the gaps in the trees, bending and twisting its way to the sea, to freedom, to eternity.

“You have me,” he'd offered, hope peaking in his tone. “I can be your mom now. If you want.”

Her hand had found his, delicate palms a wonder to behold, and thunder had raged outside. He'd climbed into the narrow bed next to her, held her tiny form as she'd fallen asleep, small snores shaking against his chest. And he'd loved her. Felt love like he never had before, little six year old mind making a promise to itself to *protect, protect, protect.*

She had grown, throughout the years. Become more than herself, drifted from infancy to childhood to adolescence, to what he saw now. Womanhood. Bravery. But despite all of that, despite changing and learning and blooming, she was still what she always had been:

A scared little girl afraid of the storm.

His little sister.

His girl.

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“It's okay, Will,” Hannibal soothed, “I understand.”

His knees felt about to buckle, stomach ready to heave. His thoughts were a litany of *Abigail* and *Hannibal* and *choose*. His vision blurred dramatically, world quite literally tilting in his mind. Hannibal was his everything, his love, his light. But this was *Abigail*. Limbs frozen in place, he was surprised he didn't drop the knife he was still holding, that Verger had *given* him, knowingly, preparing also to press one against Abigail's neck. How many knives did Verger have on him? How deep were his pockets?

“Time is ticking, Mr Graham,” Verger reminded, and Will could do nothing but meet her eyes where she was struggling against Verger's hold, rocking the wheelchair back and forth ever-so-slightly. She looked scared, but beyond that, there was a courage. Tears didn't seem to be building, not like they were for Will. She hadn't let out a sound, and appeared to be in complete and total control as she came face to face with her death. His daring girl. His stupid girl. “Who can't you live without?”

One glance at Hannibal and he would be done. He knew he would fall, could anticipate the force as his knees hit the platform, the wail that would escape his mouth. Verger would likely kill both of them, then. The worst possible outcome. The knife in his hand was the heaviest thing he'd ever lifted, and he remembered hazily, a lifetime ago, holding the same burden of fate. Back when Budge was the most powerful thing he'd ever faced, when he'd changed the ending with a simple throw.

Not this time.

Verger had positioned her expertly, head bowed by hers so that if Will tried anything he would hit no target. He had no doubt poured over the tapes of the Games, studying each and every one of Will's strengths and weaknesses, knowing exactly how to get him right where it hurt, back him into a corner that he couldn't break free of. If only he'd understood a few seconds earlier, and had cut Hannibal free before Verger had the chance to bring Abigail into this. If only Will wasn't half-delirious, amber liquid still in his veins. Helpless, he looked to Verger in desperation.

“Please,” he croaked, brimming with emotion. “Not her. Not him.”

“*Choose*.”

“*No!”*

Will was shocked to hear that the exclamation didn't come from him, feeling his tongue still dry with horror. Verger, equally as surprised, looked to the side, and laughed, threw his head back like it was the funniest thing in the world, while he frivolously destroyed Will's. He was careless, hungry, and Will despised him.

Coming into view was Miriam, gun shaking in her hand, sweat dripping down her forehead like rain. Her reckless courage froze his insides, the prospects that it brought. Verger wouldn't like her impromptu appearance, would like her even less for disrupting his plan. Verger wasn't much for plans, really, was more about living in the moment and doing whatever his heart desired.

But apparently, this once, he'd thought it through. Several things happened at once.

Will couldn't bring himself to watch as Carlo launched himself over the platform railing beside him, sending Miriam into sudden shock, spinning and firing a shot in the vague sense of his direction, missing quite significantly. Then Carlo was tackling her, the gun dropping from her hand and firing, and Verger was laughing, and then pulling his hand across Abigail's throat.

She smiled at Will, and then her blood was spraying across the floor.

Will turned, pushing Hannibal round with one shove, and scraped the knife down his back, freeing him from the bindings of the straitjacket. The knife hit the floor and he ran, time feeling like it was passing slower, somehow. Rushing to her falling body, that Verger had dropped like hot coal as soon as she'd started bleeding, he caught her in his arms, collapsing to his knees as he did so. Hands moving to cover her spurting neck, he tried to keep them still, tried to will the blood back in, or at least prevent more from slipping out. He could feel the resistance against his fingers, wet, scarlet, squeezing through his knuckles.

“Will,” she was rasping, sweet, loving, forgiving.

“*No*,” he replied, hoarse, holding tight. There was a cry behind him, remarkably un-Hannibal, so he didn't bother checking. Hannibal was doing what he did best: killing. Will was doing what he did best: failing. “I will *not* let you die. You are *not* leaving me.”

“It's alright, big brother.” The blood was gurgling in her mouth, beginning to choke her, and Will was sobbing now, tears falling straight from his eyes. Involuntarily, he began to rock, holding her in his arms as he did, like she was two years old again and ferocious rain was splashing against the window. “I love you.”

“Try not to talk, okay?” he begged, a trembling hand cupping her face. Her skin was just as soft as it had been the day she was born, the elegant newness of a tiny infant, a baby that had its father's eyes and his grace, too. Who knew, back then, what Garret Jacob Hobbs would come to do? “Just don't talk. You'll be fine, trust me. You'll be okay. You'll see. When this is all over, I'll take you far, far away from here, and we'll be happy, okay? We'll be free.”

“Where?” she questioned, eyes clouding over, mouth barely managing to produce words anymore, slick and wet with her crimson blood.

“Anywhere,” he answered, heart tripping an uneven rhythm in his chest. Perhaps he would go with her. Perhaps he wasn't made for a life without her. There was blood on her teeth as she responded to him, licking it away, no doubt tasting the metal of it on her tongue.

“Where's anywhere?”

“I love you,” he cried, shaking his head, letting tears loose as he fought the urge to scream to high heaven, plead with whatever God there was to save her, to *take him, dammit.*

She smiled, and it was serene. Painfully, he knew what she was about to say, could almost hear it on her lips as one of her bloodstained hands reached up to him, finger trailing along his lips, his cheek, smudging under his eye.

“See?”

Ice blue eyes and the press of a finger against lips danced through his mind, and Abigail Hobbs… Abigail *Graham* sighed her last breath, and then she was gone.

She was limp and lifeless in his arms like one of those dolls she'd treasured so much as a child, made of rags and leftover fabric that their mother hadn't had need for. She'd named them silly, precocious things like *Isadora* and *Persephone* and Will had half-hated her then, in that awkward in-between phase, seen her as nothing but a hindrance, his annoying little sister that cluttered his tidy room with her girly toys. He'd screamed at her one day that she wasn't his *real* sister and told her to get out, and she'd cried. It had been forgotten within days, but he'd made her one of those dolls for her birthday that year, shabby and apologetic, and she'd beamed so hard it could've blinded the sun, and pronounced the doll as *Wilma*.

They'd all been tossed into a storage box within months, her next childlike obsession being with pretty birds and not *dolls*, but it had meant something, back then.

Didn't it still?

A scream ripped from his throat as he pressed his face into her hair, hand slipping from its grip on her throat, spewing blood as it went. He sounded like some wild, wounded animal, howling in agony, weeping, wailing. It was the darkest, most immense pain that he had ever experienced, clasping his heart in a tight fist, squeezing, wringing out any trace of blood or life. Hannibal was at his side, hand rubbing over his shoulder, trying gently to pull him back, but Will was clinging onto her with an unshakeable grasp, shoving an elbow back as Hannibal tried to comfort him, pushing him away.

“No, I need to,” he sobbed, “I need to...”

“Will,” Hannibal said, soft, “oh, Will.”

“Abigail.”

She was so soft and frail in his arms, so breakable. Had Verger always planned for this? When he'd said he would brand Will, was this what he'd meant? An iron wasn't necessary, not when Abigail lay dead in his arms. Dead, gone, lost.

Dead.

Head shooting up, his eyes fixed on Miriam, crouched awkwardly a few metres away, tears streaming down her face as she watched, shock frozen on her expression. Carlo lay broken beside her, entirely still. Hannibal's work, Will assumed. A rising rush of rage built in him as

he stared at her, saw the gun on the ground near her foot where it had spun away once she'd been tackled.

“How?” he demanded. “How are you here?”

“Commander Pazzi, he helped us. Said we'd need all the fighters we could get. So he sneaked us out of Thirteen,” she admitted, voice shaking, panic taking grip. “I'm so sorry, Will.”

“No need,” he replied, grabbing the gun and pulling the trigger.

Eyes wide and shocked, she fell back against the floor, a fresh bullet hole growing in her head. It was Miriam's fault, really. If she hadn't turned up then Abigail might still be alive, might be smiling or crying or laughing, real and awake, moving, feeling, seeing. Miriam was most certainly dead, but he fired again, aiming for her chest. The gun went off again, again, once more, before there was nothing but an empty click. Frantically, he pulled the trigger again, *knowing* it was pointless, but being unable to deny the ache of it all, the desperation to *avenge*.

She was why Abigail was dead.

“You *killed* her,” he hollered, and then Hannibal was taking the gun from his hand, pulling him tight against his chest as he cried, body heaving with the force of it.

“It's okay, Will,” Hannibal was murmuring in his ear, hand coming to stroke through his curls, smooth across his forehead, peppering kisses across his temple. A thin, painful sound escaped him, a sorrowful whimper, and he felt the air go out of him, giving himself over to Hannibal's arms, the grief like a roaring tidal wave.

“Abigail,” he wept, staring into her blue, unseeing eyes, heart growing cold.

“I'm here, Will,” Hannibal said, breath warm against his face. “I'll always be here.”

Chapter End Notes

Rest in peace, Abigail. Thank you all for reading this far.

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Verger's wheelchair had caught on a protruding floorboard while rushing away from the crime scene, and he'd tripped from it, falling into his own aquarium, drowning there.

That was the official story, anyway.

Nobody who'd witnessed it mentioned how Margot had held him under the water with vengeful hands and helpful strength from Alana, pushing his head down until the eel that lived there forced its way down his throat. Hannibal had led Will to it, had left his hand resting on his lower back, stood by his side as it had occurred, his figure a solid form next to Will. But half-dazed and hurting terribly, Will had felt quite detached from it all, the splashing water and frantic gurgling, the joint efforts of the girls.

“I thought you'd want to watch,” Hannibal had said, but instead Will had buried his face into his chest, sighing as his arms came up to embrace him, simply listening to Verger's spluttering struggles until he finally went still. Mason Verger, finally dead. It was what he deserved, really. It was what Will had waited for.

Pazzi's fate was far more mysterious. He was found the next morning, disembowelled, hanging from an upstairs window with a thick line of rope. Will had looked at Hannibal and kissed him right there and then, amongst all the panicked buzz of investigation, kissed away the gratitude and pain. With Pazzi, Miriam and Verger dead, there wasn't many others to blame. Nobody but himself. He knew Abigail would disapprove- *would've* disapproved- but that spike of justice he'd experienced as each one died was the most he'd felt in days. Except for the mind-numbing mourning. That never left.

The mansion felt empty, despite all of its new inhabitants, the dregs of District 13 living off its endless riches. Will could watch people mill around all day, observe the politics of the situation unfold with a chaotic hum, and still feel so, so alone. Even on the balcony, looking out across the great metropolitan city, skyscrapers stretching up forever and the streets bustling with life, it felt cold without her. Barren and insignificant.

“She should be here,” he muttered to Bev one day, sun glaring down on them both, the Capitol buzzing below them.

“She is.”

“Her body isn't *her*,” he snapped, thinking of her lying in Verger's basement with the other dead, chest hurting so badly he wanted to shout it away. Bev linked her hand in his, sighing.

“I didn't mean her body,” she replied, and it didn't take a genius to work out what she was getting at. But Abigail's constant presence in his memory wasn't at all significant- he'd had

that when she was alive. Its continued existence now didn't mean a thing, only that he missed her.

Abigail burned three days after her death, piled in with the others on a pyre of wood in Verger's expansive gardens, fire clutching around her, hot hands dragging her down into nothingness, into hell. Will stared into the flames and longed for them to bring her back to him, wished blindly to catch a glimpse of movement in them and watch her rise from the ashes like a phoenix. He ended up moving so close that he could feel the heat thrown off it like a furnace, was choking on the smoke and the smell of burning flesh, heart breaking all over again with the knowledge that she was in the air around him, that she was leaving this earth forever.

So much for fighting for her future. What was the point of a new world if she hadn't lived to see it?

Numb for days, he let himself cry that night, fire dancing behind his eyes, a never-ending nightmare. Hannibal held him in the bed they shared as he sobbed, forcing water down his hoarse throat once every few hours so he didn't dehydrate. Will was grateful for the soft cage of his arms, for the quiet comfort of his voice as he wept, abandoning all pretence of recovery, the façade he'd tried to keep up since she passed. The Games had given him his fair share of scars, and so had Verger, but this one would never heal, never fade. He could imagine that it would stay angry and red, a sore wound upon his heart, until the day he died. Until the day he saw her again, wherever that may be.

“It won't be like this forever. The pain will become bearable,” Hannibal whispered, and he was really the only person Will was willing to listen to when it came to this matter. Not because of who he was to Will, but because of *what he'd been through*. To lose a sister… what an earth-shattering, agonising tragedy. What a joke. “Eventually.”

“It'll always be there though, won't it?”

“Yes. Always.” Hannibal combed a hand through Will's curls, doting, devoted. His eyes were becoming distant, haunted, the way they always did when he thought of Mischa. “But it's better that way. It means you don't forget.”

“I don't want to forget.”

“Good. The pain will never let you.”

“Good.”

Will kissed him then, to forget.

It didn't work.

Bella decided that the best way to build a fresh Panem was to have an election, rather than just take over. She, of course, would be running, and Will had it on good authority that a few Capitol officials, the ones lower down the hierarchy who'd had less hand in the worse things Verger had done, would also be partaking. Margot, when asked, had politely refused. Will

listened absent-mindedly one night over dinner as Bella explained it all, discussing politics with Jack and Hannibal, conversation touching on things like campaigns and policies and really, Will respected her grace in the situation, but it didn't half make his head hurt. Georgia gripped his hand under the table and it was the only thing that he could make sense of, the only thing he knew. That, and the rapidly disappearing wine in front of him.

He polished off two and a half bottles that night all on his own, and was sick all over himself the minute he and Hannibal got back to their room. Hannibal peeled off Will's clothes and then his own, and took him into the shower, slowly and thoroughly washing him down while he cried and apologised, wanting to drown himself in the water like he had with the wine, drinking away his sorrows. Hannibal didn't kiss his mouth, quite understandably, but kissed his cheek, his neck, his shoulder.

They didn't give him wine the next day at dinner, so he crept from their room in the middle of their night and found Verger's vodka, drunk it straight from the bottle and hated the taste, but chased it evermore. It was like bloodlust, he thought.

“You're a mess,” Bev finally told him after a week of this behaviour, catching him in the kitchens and snatching the bottle from his hands. Through a drunken haze he tried to scowl at her, grabbing for the bottle. She, stone cold sober, was much too fast for him. “You can't keep doing this.”

“I thought you loved her,” he slurred, and she froze. “But you don't seem to care at all.”

“I *do* care. Just because I'm not drinking myself to death don't assume that I *don't care*,” she uttered, venom in her words, there to mask the agony. “Not all grief looks the same.”

“What does yours look like?” he asked, mocking. “Being happy with your girlfriend? Planning your future together?”

“It looks like not sleeping for days on end. It looks like barely eating, like not being able to smile without feeling guilty, like my chest aching every time I breathe,” she was saying, voice breaking, and Will knew the feeling all too well. “It looks like pretending I'm okay all the time when I'm really, really *not*.”

Having Beverly in his arms, fragile and shaking, was a terrifying reminder of Abigail, of how she'd felt as she'd died, life quite literally draining from her. But this was Bev, this was his best friend, and she was hurting; he'd had to hug her, really. It was his job. She'd cried against him like she was so little and so scared, like they were just kids again and she was frightened of the reaping, of the prospect of imminent death while they both had so much life left to live.

There were worse things.

“It's alright,” he murmured, holding her so softly. “It's alright, Abigail.”

It took him a few seconds to work out he'd said the wrong name, lost in the fantasy that it was her.

That was the last night he touched the vodka. It gave him too much hope.

Time seemed to pass differently, now. It was much too slow, each day dragging along, grinding his heart even further into a pulp. Monotony had become painful, immensely so, but some days he simply couldn't bring himself to get out of bed, exhaustion hanging heavy from every one of his limbs, making him groggy and spiteful, letting words he didn't really mean spill to his friends, pushing them further away, wanting the isolation like a drug. On the days he did get up, there wasn't much to do. Sometimes, he'd sit out in the gardens, walk to the charred spot where she'd burned. Other times, he'd end up down with the pigs, press his fingers to the now-clean floor where her blood had been only a month or so ago. Her dying words echoed down here, bouncing around in his brain, the remorse utterly inescapable.

Abigail had died and now he saw her everywhere.

He saw her in the colour blue, in the guileless smile of a child, in all the beauties of the world: the birds and the flowers and the clouds. She was always there in his brief moments of peace, when he pressed his lips to Hannibal's, when he cradled Bev in his arms, when he watched the fish swim in eternal circles in Verger's pond. She sat by his side like a ghost, her presence merely a whisper, so scarce that when he eventually gave into the temptation to check, she was gone.

“She manifests herself in the things you love,” Bedelia unpicked, and he looked at her, staring but not seeing. “Because you loved her so very much.”

“It doesn't take an expert to work that one out.”

“Do you see her in Hannibal?” she asked, and he laughed, not at all expecting the question.

“She was never like him,” he offered, but the words were burrowing deeper into his head, making him ponder it. “But I suppose… Sometimes, he'll say something, and it'll be especially observant, or perceptive, and… I'll think of her. Only for a moment, but… she'll cross my mind. She never leaves, really.”

“Inability to let go of a loved one can indicate unfinished business,” she suggested. “Do you have unfinished business, Will?”

“I don't know.”

“Let's put it this way: if she were here now… what would you say to her?”

She was there, now, clear cut in his mind. Hair falling off one shoulder, shining in the sun, head tilted up to the sky. She was a hot summer's day, a cosy winter's night by a fire, she was something he never wanted to end. There was so much he wanted to say, endless apologies and sad goodbyes. But as he spoke the words fell from his tongue without thought, with no preparation.

“I don't see,” he breathed, heart feeling as though it was about to burst with the pain of it all. “I don't understand, why… why you had to go. Why couldn't it have been me? You were just so...”

He ran out of words to finish the sentence, blinking tears from his eyes, and Bedelia let him run from the room without a second glance. Later, he poured a bath with water so hot it was scalding, sat there until the pads of his fingers wrinkled, and exited with skin so pink he was sure he looked quite ridiculous. Hannibal, of course, said he was still as arresting as ever, that he was like a beautiful rose that he couldn't resist picking, willing to risk the prick of thorns on his fingers for the pleasure of his company, unable to fight his allure.

Will laughed and accused him of blind flattery, shoving his seeking mouth away.

“I'm always blind with you, my love,” Hannibal murmured, only crawling back up Will's body, leaning down for the kiss he was so cruelly denied.

Will enjoyed these games, this tease, the push and pull of want and refusal, the way it made Hannibal's lip curl in amusement and his eyes spark in arousal. He was rapidly noticing his own proclivity for power, how it made him breathless, sent a thrill through him and a shiver down his spine. If he pushed past the mindless fury, the exhilaration he'd felt as Miriam had died had been incomparable. It stretched back, too: Dolarhyde, Ingram, Budge, Buddish. Violence, was… intoxicating, when he was inflicting it. When he had control over who was on the receiving end of it, rather than helplessly watching as his world was torn apart by a tiny blade and the maniac who wielded it.

A long time ago he would've thought this to be wrong, would be terrified of his own urges and impulses, the desire to see blood running like a river from the throat of someone particularly rude. But that boy existed so far away, in nothing but a memory, one so faint that Will had to wonder if he ever really existed at all. If he had, he was long gone now. Will hadn't heard from him in years, and the last remnants of him had died with Abigail, had bled out there on the floor like he didn't matter at all.

Will was no longer the simple son of a fisherman, his father's boy no more. Will was a killer, a cannibal, and more importantly, his own man.

Did his own sister have to die for him to realise it?

“Bedelia only wants to help. She means well,” Hannibal argued later, finger tracing the outline of Will's lips, transfixed.

“I know,” Will said, feeling Hannibal's questing finger trail to his jaw. “I think I need to leave.”

“Leave?” Hannibal questioned, hand stilling, dropping from Will's face.

“I need… space. I need time,” he confessed, heart heavy. “I can't be here. Not where she… I'm sorry.”

“How long have you been considering this?”

“A while. You don't have to come with me.”

“Oh, my darling boy,” Hannibal hummed, “I would follow you anywhere.”

Anywhere. Words rested on Will's lips, but he didn't say them. There was a lot to say, in the coming days. Farewell after farewell, spoken like dust in the breeze on the train station platform, nothing but a ripple in time, fleeting.

Freddie wished him luck, and he said the same, with a pointed glance in the direction of Reba McClane, now a permanent fixture in the President's mansion and just as alone as Freddie. Jack, ever the stoic, gave Will's hand a firm shake, jaw tight as he nodded at him, voice a little choked as he said goodbye. Alana hugged him tight and told him how she'd always believed in him, how she'd always loved him so deeply, and through tear-blurred eyes he thanked her, the thick emotion in his voice enough to tell her how he loved her in return. Margot didn't say a word, her embrace all he needed to understand what she meant. All those months shared together in the cells below this very mansion hadn't been meaningless, not when it came to each other.

“Always,” she promised, pressing something into his hand. When he opened his palm he saw a stag, a pin, a gift from another world, another time. Verger had stolen it from him after he'd kidnapped him from the arena, kept it in a little box somewhere with all his other trophies, all the items he could turn to if he ever felt particularly insecure in his wickedness.

Pressing a kiss to her cheek, he wished her all the happiness in the world, and he meant it. At lunch, he'd handed Bella a note, which she'd discreetly opened under the table. On it, were five names, each with a box by them. The box by Margot's name had a hastily scrawled cross in it.

“This is in no way official, you realise,” Bella had informed, ready to disregard his ballot. “Margot won't even be running for President.”

“So she says, at the moment. But she will. I know her,” he'd assured. “And I ask you, if you have any respect for me and what I've been through: count it. Don't tell her until it's all over.”

Trust was a delicate thing, at first, but once established, could be incredibly powerful. Will trusted Margot, trusted her with the lives of his friends and the wellbeing of the entirety of Panem. She was right for the job, had been right since her father died and her tyrant of a brother had taken over. Her time had come, and she would see that soon.

Behind her was Peter, sorrow set on his face, and Will hung onto him so hard he worried he'd break him, sadness stuck in his throat like the smoke of Abigail's cremation. It had been so heavy he'd coughed up half his lungs, wheezing for hours after, almost regretting his decision to get so close. It wasn't dissimilar now, a raw, bittersweet feeling of sentimentality grasping him. Georgia's goodbye was just as bad, aching and dizzy as they embraced, his heart suffering more by the second. It didn't feel right, to let go of people so significant in his life, but then it hadn't been right that Abigail had died. It wasn't right that she was nothing but ash in the air, a phantom in nothing but memories.

“Where will you go?” Bev asked, small.

“Far away from here,” he answered, a sad smile curved across his mouth.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“One day,” he said, and remembered so long ago, the words of a girl who had died and yet now walked and talked like anybody else. “I'm sure our paths will cross again.”

When she went into his arms, Beverly smelt like home. She was sunrise and river-bound days, the feeling of rain upon bare skin and mud between his toes. The mundanities of life, the parts that were hidden and exquisite, that would only be noticed when one stopped to look, took a breath, paused, and saw. She distilled a peace in him like nothing he'd ever known, a calm that he would miss until he touched it again, let it encompass him. Her chrysanthemum necklace pressed against his breastbone, a vague reminder of love and hope eternal.

When he got home, it smelt like Beverly. District 4 hadn't changed a bit, but Will knew that within the next few years it was likely to become unrecognisable. The future was filled with hope, blooming like bluebells were around his old house. They had sold all their furniture years ago, knowing their new house in the Victor's Village would have all they needed, so he and Hannibal slept on the floor of his old room that night, wrapped around each other for warmth. They could've had a warm bed if they'd wanted, travelled to the other side of the District and slept soundly, but as soon as Will had set foot in this ramshackle haven, he hadn't wanted to leave. The creak of the floorboards, the uneven stairs, it was where he'd grown up. He had missed it.

“It's exactly what I imagined,” Hannibal said, and Will pushed him down to the floor and climbed atop him, lips buzzing with anticipation.

On their way to the beach the next morning, Will waved to Molly, nodded to Marissa, greeted Winston. A half-crushed bluebell sat in his pocket, one he'd plucked from the grass by his house with expert care, something to keep him from forgetting, something to keep him strong. His past was fading into the background, into nothing but a memory, the gravel beneath his feet soon to be history. Would they be written about, one day? Taught, to children like Abigail, bright-eyed and open-minded, with so many years stretching ahead of them? Perhaps. But Will wouldn't be coming back here for a very long time.

As they pushed the boat out to sea, a sturdy looking sailboat that they were stealing, Will didn't feel miserable for the first time since Abigail. He felt hope, felt potential. Here with Hannibal, on the edge of the world, he had so much yet to do, so much to discover, so much life waiting before him, skipping across the waves and reflecting off the sun. This was real. The water lapping against his calves was real, the wind whipping through his hair was real, and so was Hannibal, gazing at him with raw affection as he basked in the early sunlight.

“Will Graham,” he rasped, “the great love of my life. The day I met you... I could never have known how I would love you. My magnificent, bloody boy. My Will.”

“You've always had such a flair for the dramatic,” he replied, playful but fond, laughing as Hannibal blinked at him, endearments gone unappreciated, the sound escaping his mouth as free as a bird, the only freedom since *her*.

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“Are you sure about this?” Hannibal asked, looking past him to the great hulk of District 4, his home, where he'd first grown his heart. “Leaving it all behind?”

“I'm sure,” he whispered, the pin in one pocket and the bluebell in the other, two pieces of his soul. Him and her. Hannibal and Abigail, his forevers. “I just don't know where to go.”

“Anywhere, I suppose.”

The prospect of the unknown. That was what it was all about, wasn't it? Will smiled, wide and open and true, looking not to the horizon but to his real future, to Hannibal. His hair was tawny in the broad light of day and his eyes glinted like jewels, and Will loved him. Will would love him always, anywhere, endlessly. Amidst vast oceans and burning cities and tiny little kitchens with his father's kind eyes.

Where was anywhere?

Chapter End Notes

I'm at something of a loss for words; I can't believe we're finally here. I first conceived this idea in October of 2015 and while I didn't begin it until much later and finish it later yet, this project (and yes - it was a project more than a fic - my god it was a project) has taken up years of my life, technically. It's been frustrating and there were days where I didn't write anything at all and looked at it all as completely worthless, but all of you - whether you were there from the beginning or only just started reading - made it worth it. This is by far the longest thing I've ever written and I am absolutely notorious for lacking motivation, but here we are with a finished series. It's far from perfect but I put in a lot of effort and it's wonderful to see that recognised. You've all been such fantastic readers.

Forgive me for rambling, I'm a sentimentalist, but thank you all so much. Your support has meant the world to me.

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